THIS MORTAL COIL

VOL. I.

THIS MORTAL COIL

A Novel

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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From their affectionate Brother,

Grant.

TO

FRED AND RUSHTON,

FRATERNAL GREETINGS.

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THIS MORTAL COIL.

CHAPTER I.

BOHEMIA.

WHOEVER knows Bohemian London, knows the smoking-room of the Cheyne Row Club. No more comfortable or congenial divan exists anywhere between Regent Circus and Hyde Park Corner than that chosen paradise of unrecognized genius. The Cheyne Row Club is not large, indeed, but it prides itself upon being extremely select—too select to admit upon its list of members peers, politicians, country gentlemen, or inhabitants of eligible family residences in Mayfair or Belgravia. Two qualifications are understood to be indispensable in condidates for membership: they must be truly great, and

they must be unsuccessful. Possession of a commodious suburban villa excludes *ipso facto*. The Club is emphatically the head-quarters of the great Bohemian clan; the gathering-place of unhung artists, unread novelists, unpaid poets, and unheeded social and political reformers generally. Hither flock all the choicest spirits of the age during that probationary period when society, in its slow and lumbering fashion, is spending twenty years in discovering for itself the bare fact of their distinguished existence. Here Maudle displays his latest designs to Postlethwaite's critical and admiring eye; here Postlethwaite pours his honeyed sonnets into Maudle's receptive and sympathetic tympanum. Everybody who is anybody has once been a member of the "dear old Cheyne Row:" Royal Academicians and Cabinet Ministers and Society Journalists and successful poets still speak with lingering pride and affection of the days when they lunched there, as yet undiscovered, on a single chop and a glass of draught claret by no means of the daintiest.

Not that the Club can number any of them

now on its existing roll-call : the Cheyne Row is for prospective celebrity only; accomplished facts transfer themselves at once to a statelier site in Pall Mall near the Duke of York's Column. Rising merit frequents the Tavern, as scoffers profanely term it : risen greatness basks rather on the lordly stuffed couches of Waterloo Place. No man, it has been acutely observed, remains a Bohemian when he has daughters to marry. The pure and blameless ratepayer avoids Prague. As soon as Smith becomes Chancellor of the Exchequer, as soon as Brown takes silk, as soon as Robinson is elected an Associate, as soon as Tompkins publishes his popular novel, they all incontinently with one accord desert the lesser institution in the Piccadilly byway, and pass on their names, their honours, their hats, and their subscriptions to the dignified repose of the Athenæum. For them, the favourite haunt of judge and bishop : for the young, the active, the struggling, and the incipient, the chop and claret of the less distinguished but more lively caravanserai by the Green Park purlieus.

In the smoking-room of this eminent and

unsuccessful Bohemian society, at the tag-end of a London season, one warm evening in a hot July, Hugh Massinger, of the Utter Bar, sat lazily by the big bow window, turning over the pages of the last number of the *Charing Cross Review*.

That he was truly great, nobody could deny. He was in very fact a divine bard, or, to be more strictly accurate, the author of a pleasing and melodious volume of minor poetry. Even away from the Cheyne Row Club, none but the most remote of country-cousins—say from the wilder parts of Cornwall or the crofter-clad recesses of the Isle of Skye—could have doubted for a moment the patent fact that Hugh Massinger was a distinguished (though unknown) poet of the antique school, so admirably did he fit his part in life as to features, dress, and general appearance. Indeed, malicious persons were wont at times unkindly to insinuate that Hugh was a poet, not because he found in himself any special aptitude for stringing verses or building the lofty rhyme, but because his face and bearing imperatively compelled him to adopt the thankless profes-

sion of bard in self-justification and self-defence. This was ill-natured, and it was also untrue; for Hugh Massinger had lisped in numbers—at least in penny ones—ever since he was able to lisp in print at all. Elizabethan or nothing, he had taken to poetry almost from his very cradle; and had astonished his father at sixteen by a rhymed version of an ode of Horace, worthy the inspiration of the great Dr. Watts himself, and not, perhaps, far below the poetic standard of Mr. Martin Farquhar Tupper. At Oxford he had perpetrated a capital Newdigate; and two years after gaining his fellowship at Oriel, he had published anonymously, in parchment covers, "Echoes from Callimachus, and other Poems"—in the style of the early romantic school—which had fairly succeeded by careful nursing in attaining the dignity of a second edition under his own name. So that Massinger's claim to the sodality of the craft whose workmen are "born not made" might perhaps be considered as of the genuine order, and not entirely dependent, as cynics averred, upon his long hair, his pensive eyes, his dark-

brown cheek, or the careless twist of his neck-tie and his shirt-collar.

Nevertheless, even in these minor details of the poetical character, it must candidly be confessed that Hugh Massinger outstripped by several points many of the more recognized bards whose popular works are published in regulation green-cloth octavos, and whose hats and cloaks, of unique build, adorn with their presence the vestibule pegs of the Athenæum itself. He went back to the traditions of the youth of our century. The undistinguished author of "Echoes from Callimachus" was tall and pale, and a trifle Byronic. That his face was beautiful, extremely beautiful, even a hostile reviewer in the organ of another clique could hardly venture seriously to deny: those large grey eyes, that long black hair, that exquisitely chiselled and delicate mouth, would alone have sufficed to attract attention and extort admiration anywhere in the universe, or at the very least in the solar system.

Hugh Massinger, in short, was (like Coleridge) a noticeable man. It would have been impossible to pass him by, even in a crowded

street, without a hurried glance of observation and pleasure at his singularly graceful and noble face. He looked and moved every inch a poet; delicate, refined, cultivated, expressive, and sicklied o'er with that pale cast of thought which modern æstheticism so cruelly demands as a proof of attachment from her highest votaries. Yet at the same time, in spite of deceptive appearances to the contrary, he was strong in muscular strength: a wiry man, thin, but well knit: one of those fallacious, uncanny, long-limbed creatures who can scale an Alp or tramp a score or so of miles before breakfast, while looking as if a short stroll through the Park would kill them outright with sheer exhaustion. Altogether, a typical poet of the old-fashioned school, that dark and handsome Italianesque man: and as he sat there carelessly, with the paper held before him, in an unstudied attitude of natural grace, many a painter might have done worse than choose the author of "Echoes from Callimachus" for the subject of a pretty Academy pot-boiler.

So Warren Relf, the unknown marine artist, thought to himself in his armchair

opposite, as he raised his eyes by chance from the etchings in the *Portfolio*, and glanced across casually with a hasty look at the undiscovered poet.

"Has the *Charing Cross* reviewed your new volume yet?" he asked politely, his glance meeting Massinger's while he flung down the paper on the table beside him.

The poet rose and stood with his hands behind his back in an easy posture before the empty fireplace. "I believe it has deigned to assign me half a column of judicious abuse," he answered, half yawning, with an assumption of profound indifference and contempt for the *Charing Cross Review* and all its ideas or opinions collectively. "To tell you the truth, the subject's one that doesn't interest me. In the first place, I care very little for my own verses. And in the second place, I don't care at all for reviewers generally, or for the *Charing Cross Snarler* and its kind in particular. I disbelieve altogether in reviews, in fact. Familiarity breeds contempt. To be quite candid, I've written too many of them."

"If criticism in literature's like criticism

in art," the young painter rejoined, smiling, "why, with the one usual polite exception of yourself, Massinger, I can't say I think very much of the critics.—But what do you mean, I should like to know, by saying you don't care for your own verses? Surely no man can do anything great, in literature or art—or in shoe-blacking or pig-sticking, if it comes to that—unless he thoroughly believes in his own vocation."

Massinger laughed a musical laugh. "In shoe-blacking or pig-sticking," he said with a delicate curl of his thin lips, "that's no doubt true; but in verse-making, query? Who on earth at the present day could even pretend to himself to believe in poetry? Time was, I dare say,—though I'm by no means sure of it —when the bard, hoary old impostor, was a sort of prophet, and went about the world with a harp in his hand, and a profound conviction in his innocent old heart that when he made 'Sapphic' rhyme to 'traffic,' or produced a sonnet on the theme of 'Catullus,' 'lull us,' and 'cull us,' he was really and truly enriching humanity with a noble gift of divine poesy. If the amiable old humbug

could actually bring himself to believe in his soul that stringing together fourteen lines into an indifferent piece, or balancing 'mighty' to chime with 'Aphrodite,' in best Swinburnian style, was fulfilling his appointed function in the scheme of the universe, I'm sure I should be the last to interfere with the agreeable delusion under which (like the gentlemen from Argos in Horace) he must have been labouring. It's so delightful to believe in anything, that for my own part I wouldn't attempt to insinuate doubts into the mind of a contented Buddhist or a devout worshipper of Mumbo Jumbo."

"But surely you look upon yourself as a reaction against this modern school of Swinburnians and ballad-mongers, don't you?" Relf said with a shrug.

"Of course I do. Byron's my man. I go back to the original divine inspiration of the romantic school. It's simpler, and it's easier. But what of that? Our method's all the same at bottom, after all. Who in London in this nineteenth century can for a moment affect to believe in the efficacy of poetry? Look at this last new volume of my own, for

example!—You won't look at it, of course, I'm well aware, but that's no matter: nobody ever does look at my immortal works, I'm only too profoundly conscious. I cut them myself in a dusty copy at all the libraries, in order to create a delusive impression on the mind of the public that I've had at least a solitary reader. But let that pass.—Look, metaphorically, I mean, and not literally, at this last new volume of mine! How do you think a divine bard does it? Simply by taking a series of rhymes—'able,' and 'stable,' and 'table,' and 'cable;' 'Mabel,' and 'Babel,' and 'fable,' and 'gable'—and weaving them all together cunningly by a set form into a Procrustean mould to make up a poem. Perhaps 'gable,' which you've mentally fixed upon for the fourth line, won't suit the sense. Very well, then; you must do your best to twist something reasonable, or at least inoffensive, out of 'sable' or 'label,' or 'Cain and Abel,' or anything else that will make up the rhyme and complete the metre."

"And is that your plan, Massinger?"

"Yes, all this last lot of mine are done like that: just *bouts rimés*—I admit the fact; for

what's all poetry but *bouts rimés* in the highest perfection? Mechanical, mechanical. I draw up a lot of lists of rhymes beforehand: 'kirtle,' and 'myrtle,' and 'hurtle,' and 'turtle' (those are all original); 'pæan,' 'Ægean,' 'plebeian,' and 'Tean' (those are fairly new); 'battle,' and 'cattle,' and 'prattle,' and 'rattle' (those are all commonplace); and then, when the divine afflatus seizes me, I take out the lists and con them over, and weave them up into an undying song for future generations to go wild about and comment upon. 'What profound thought,' my unborn Malones and Furnivalls and Leos will ask confidingly in their learned editions, 'did the immortal bard mean to convey by this obscure couplet?' I'll tell you in confidence. He meant to convey the abstruse idea that 'passenger' was the only English word he could find in the dictionary at all like a rhyme to the name of 'Massinger.'"

Warren Relf looked up at him a little uneasily.

"I don't like to hear you run down poetry like that," he said, with an evident tinge of disapprobation. "I'm not a poet myself, of

course; but still I'm sure it isn't all a mere matter of rhymes and refrains, of epithets and prettinesses. What touches our hearts lies deeper than mere expression, I'm certain. It lies in the very core and fibre of the man. There are passages even in your own poems —though you're a great deal too cynical to admit it now—that came straight out of the depths of your own heart, I venture to conjecture—those 'Lines on a Lock of Hair,' for example.—Aha, cynic! there I touched you on the raw.—But if you think so lightly of poetry as a pursuit, as you say, I wonder why you ever came to take to it."

"Take to it, my dear fellow! What an Arcadian idea! As if men nowadays chose their sphere in life deliberately. Why, what on earth makes any of us ever take to anything, I should like to know, in this miserable workaday modern world of ours? Because we're simply pitchforked into it by circumstances. Does the crossing-sweeper sweep crossings, do you suppose, for example, by pure preference for the profession of a sweep? Does the milkman get up at five in the morning because he sees in the purveying

of skim-milk to babes and sucklings a useful, important, and even necessary industry to the rising generation of this great Metropolis? Does the dustman empty the domestic bin out of disinterested regard for public sanitation? or the engine-driver dash through rain and snow in a drear-nighted December like a Comtist prophet, out of high and noble enthusiasm of humanity?" He snapped his fingers with an emphatic negative.—"We don't choose our places in life at all, my dear boy," he went on after a pause: "we get tumbled into them by pure caprice of circumstances. If I'd chosen mine, instead of strictly meditating the thankless muse, I'd certainly have adopted the exalted profession of a landed proprietor, with the pleasing duty of receiving my rents (by proxy) once every quarter, and spending them royally with becoming magnificence, in noble ways, like the Greek gentleman one reads about in Aristotle. I always admired that amiable Greek gentleman—the *megaloprepês*, I think Aristotle calls him. His berth would suit me down to the ground. He had nothing at all of any sort to do, and he did it most

gracefully with princely generosity on a sufficient income."

"But you *must* write poetry for something or other, Massinger; for if it isn't rude to make the suggestion, you can hardly write it, you know, for a livelihood."

Massinger's dark face flushed visibly. "I write for fame," he answered majestically, with a lordly wave of his long thin hand. "For glory—for honour—for time—for eternity. Or, to be more precisely definite, if you prefer the phrase, for filthy lucre. In the coarse and crude phraseology of political economists, poetry takes rank nowadays, I humbly conceive, as a long investment. I'm a journalist by trade—a mere journeyman journalist; a gushing penny-a-liner of a futile and demoralized London press. But I have a soul within me above penny-a-lining: I aspire ultimately to a pound a word. I don't mean to live and die in Grub Street. My soul looks forward to immortality, and a footman in livery. Now, when once a man has got pitchforked by fate into the rank and file of contemporary journalism, there are only two ways possible for him to extricate

himself with peace and honour from his unfortunate position. One way is to write a successful novel. That's the easiest, quickest, and most immediate short-cut from Grub Street to Eaton Place and affluence that I know of anywhere. But unhappily it's crowded, immensely overcrowded—vehicular traffic for the present entirely suspended. Therefore, the only possible alternative is to take up poetry. The muse must descend to feel the pulse of the market. I'm conscious of the soul of song within me; that is to say, I can put 'Myrrha' to rhyme with 'Pyrrha,' and alliterate *p*s and *q*s and *w*s with any man living (bar Algernon) in all England. Now, poetry's a very long road round, I admit—like going from Kensington to the City by Willesden Junction; but in the end, if properly worked, it lands you at last by a circuitous route in fame and respectability. To be Poet Laureate is eminently respectable. A man can live on journalism meanwhile; but if he keeps pegging away at his Pegasus in his spare moments, without intermission, like a costermonger at his donkey, Pegasus will raise him after many days to the top of

Parnassus, where he can build himself a commodious family residence, lighted throughout with electric lights, and commanding a magnificent view in every direction over the Vale of Tempe and the surrounding country. Tennyson's done it already at Aldworth: why shouldn't I, too, do it in time on Parnassus?"

Relf smiled dubiously, and knocked the ash off his cigar into the Japanese tray that stood by his side. "Then you look upon poetry merely as an ultimate means of making money?" he suggested, with a deprecatory look.

"Money! Not money only, my dear fellow, but position, reputation, recognition, honour. Does any man work for anything else? Any man, I mean, but cobblers and enthusiasts?"

"Well, I don't know. I may be an enthusiast myself," Relf answered slowly; "but I certainly do work at art to a great extent for art's sake, because I really love and admire and delight in it. Of course I should like to make money too, within reasonable limits—enough to keep myself and my

people in a modest sort of way, without the footman or the eligible family residence. Not that I want to be successful, either: from what I've seen of successful men, I incline to believe that success as a rule has a very degenerating effect upon character. Literature, science, and art thrive best in a breezy, bracing air. I never aim at being a successful man myself; and if I go on as I m doing now, I shall no doubt succeed in not succeeding. But apart from the money and the livelihood altogether, I love my work as an occupation. I like doing it; and I like to see myself growing stronger and freer at it every day."

"That's all very well for you," Massinger replied with another expansive wave of his graceful hand. "You're doing work you care for, as I play lawn-tennis, for a personal amusement. I can sympathize with you there. I once felt the same about poetry myself. But that was a long time ago: those days are dead—dead—hopelessly dead, as dead as Mad Margaret's affidavit. I'm a sceptic now: my faith in verse has evaporated utterly. Have I not seen the public devour

ten successive editions of the 'Epic of Washerwomen,' or something of the sort? Have I not seen them reject the good and cleave unto the evil, like the children of Israel wandering in the Wilderness? I know now that the world is hollow, and that my doll is stuffed with sawdust.—Let's quit the subject. It turns me always into a gloomy pessimist.—What are you going to do with yourself this summer?"

"Me? Oh, just the usual thing, I suppose. Going down in my tub to paint sweet mudbanks off the coast of Suffolk."

"Suffolk to wit! I see the finger of fate in that! Why, that's just where I'm going too. I mean to take six or eight weeks' holiday, if a poor drudge of a journalist can ever be said to indulge in holidays at all—with books for review, and proofs for correction, and editorial communications for consideration, always weighing like a ton of lead upon his unhappy breast: and I propose to bury myself alive up to the chin in some obscure, out-of-the-way Suffolk village they call Whitestrand.—Have you ever heard of it?"

"Oh, I know it well," Relf answered with a smile of delightful reminiscence. "It's grand for mud. I go there painting again and again. You'd call it the funniest little stranded old-world village you ever came across anywhere in England. Nothing could be uglier, quainter, or more perfectly charming. It lies at the mouth of a dear little muddy creek, with a funny old mill for pumping the water off the sunken meadows; and all around for miles and miles is one great flat of sedge and seapink, alive with water-birds and intersected with dikes, where the herons fish all day long, poised on one leg in the middle of the stream as still as mice, exactly as if they were sitting to Marks for their portraits."

"Ah, delightful for a painter, I've no doubt," Hugh Massinger replied, half yawning to himself, "especially for a painter to whom mud and herons are bread and butter, and brackish water is Bass and Allsopp; but scarcely, you'll admit, an attractive picture to the inartistic public, among whom I take the liberty, for this occasion only, humbly to rank myself. I go there, in fact, as a martyr to

principle. I live for others. A member of my family—not to put too fine a point upon it, a lady—abides for the present moment at Whitestrand, and believes herself to be seized or possessed by prescriptive right of a lien or claim to a certain fixed aliquot portion of my time and attention. I've never admitted the claim myself (being a legally-minded soul); but just out of the natural sweetness of my disposition, I go down occasionally (without prejudice) to whatever part of England she may chance to be inhabiting, for the sake of not disappointing her foregone expectations, however ill-founded, and be the same more or less.—You observe, I speak with the charming precision of the English statute-book."

"But how do you mean to get to Whitestrand?" Relf asked suddenly after a short pause. "It's a difficult place to reach, you know. There's no station nearer than ten miles off, and that a country one, so that when you arrive there, you can get no conveyance to take you over."

"So my cousin gave me to understand. She was kind enough to provide me with

minute instructions for her bookless wilds. I believe I'm to hire a costermonger's cart or something of the sort to convey my portmanteau; and I'm to get across myself by the aid of the natural means of locomotion with which a generous providence or survival of the fittest has been good enough to endow me by hereditary transmission. At least, so my cousin Elsie instructs me."

"Why not come round with me in the tub?" Relf suggested good-humouredly.

"What? your yacht? Hatherley was telling me you were the proud possessor of a ship.—Are you going round that way any time shortly?"

"Well, she's not exactly what you call a yacht," Relf replied, with an apologetic tinge in his tone of voice. "She's only a tub, you know, an open boat almost, with a covered well and just room for three to sleep and feed in. 'A poor thing, but mine own,' as Touchstone says; as broad as she's long, and as shallow as she's broad, and quite flat-bottomed, drawing so little water at a pinch that you can sail her across an open meadow when there's a heavy dew on.—And if you

come, you'll have to work your passage, of course. I navigate her myself, as captain, crew, cabin-boy, and passenger, with one other painter fellow to share watches with me. The fact is, I got her built as a substitute for rooms, because I found it cheaper than taking lodgings at a seaside place and hiring a rowboat whenever one wanted one. I cruise about the English coast with her in summer; and in the cold months, I run her round to the Mediterranean. And besides, one can get into such lovely little side-creeks and neglected channels, all full of curious objects of interest, which nobody can ever see in anything else. She's a perfect treasure to a marine painter in the mud-and-buoy business. But I won't for a moment pretend to say she's comfortable for a landsman. If you come with me, in fact, you'll have to rough it."

"I love roughing it.—How long will it take us to cruise round to Whitestrand?"

"Oh, the voyage depends entirely upon the wind and tide. Sailing-boats take their own time. The *Mud-Turtle*—that's what I call her—doesn't hurry. She's lying now off

the Pool at the Tower, taking care of herself in the absence of all her regular crew; and Potts, my mate, he's away in the north, intending to meet me next week at Lowestoft, where my mother and sister are stopping in lodgings. We can start on our cruise whenever you like—say, if you choose, to-morrow morning."

"Thanks, awfully," Hugh answered, with a nod of assent. "To tell you the truth, I should like nothing better. It'll be an experience, and the wise man lives upon new experiences. Pallas, you remember, in Tennyson's "Œnone," recommended to Paris the deliberate cultivation of experiences as such.—I'll certainly go. For my own part, like Saint Simon I mean in my time to have tried everything. Though Saint Simon, to be sure, went rather far, for I believe he even took a turn for a while at picking pockets."

CHAPTER II.

DOWN STREAM.

TIDE served next morning at eleven; and punctual to the minute—for, besides being a poet, he prided himself on his qualities as a man of business—Hugh Massinger surrendered himself in due course by previous appointment on board the *Mud-Turtle* at the Pool by the Tower. But his eyes were heavier and redder than they had seemed last night; and his wearied manner showed at once, by a hundred little signs, that he had devoted but small time since Relf left him to what Mr. Herbert Spencer periphrastically describes as "reparative processes."

The painter, attired for the sea like a common sailor in jersey and trousers and knitted woollen cap, rose up from the deck to greet him hospitably. His whole appearance

betokened serious business. It was evident that Warren Relf did not mean to play at yachting.

"You've been making a night of it, I'm afraid, Massinger," he said, as their eyes met. "Bad preparation, you know, for a day down the river. We shall have a loppy sea, if this wind holds, when we pass the Nore. You ought to have gone straight to bed when you left the club with me last evening."

"I know I ought," the poet responded with affected cheerfulness. "The path of duty's as plain as a pikestaff. But the things I ought to do I mostly leave undone; and the things I ought not to do, I find, on the contrary, vastly attractive. I may as well make a clean breast of it. I strolled round to Pallavicini's after you vacated the Row last night, and found them having a turn or two at lansquenet. Now, lansquenet's an amusement I never can resist. The consequence was, in three hours I was pretty well cleaned out of ready cash, and shall have to keep my nose to the grindstone accordingly all through what ought by rights to have been my summer holiday. This con-

clusively shows the evils of high play, and the moral superiority of the wise man who goes home to bed and is sound asleep when the clock strikes eleven."

Relf's face fell several tones. "I wish, Massinger," he said very gravely, "you'd make up your mind never to touch those hateful cards again. You'll ruin your health, your mind, and your pocket with them. If you spent the time you spend upon play in writing some really great book now, you'd make in the end ten times as much by it."

The poet smiled a calm smile of superior wisdom. "Good boy! he cried, patting Relf on the back in mock approbation of his moral advice. "You talk for all the world like a Sunday-school prize-book. Honest industry has its due reward; while pitch-and-toss and wicked improper games land one at last in prison or the workhouse. The industrious apprentice rises in time to be Lord Mayor (and to appropriate the public funds *ad libitum*); whereas, the idle apprentice, degraded by the evil influences of ha'penny loo, ends his days with a collar of hemp round his naughty neck in an equally exalted

but perhaps less dignified position in life—on a platform at Newgate. My dear Relf, how on earth can you, who are a sensible man, believe all that antiquated nursery rubbish? Cast your eyes for a moment on the world around you, here in the central hub of London, within sight of all the wealth and squalor of England, and ask yourself candidly whether what you see in it at all corresponds with the idyllic picture of the little-Jack-Horner school of moralists. As a matter of fact, is it always the good boys who pull the plums with self-appreciative smile out of the world's pudding? Far from it: quite the other way. I have seen the wicked flourishing in my time like a green bay-tree. Honest industry breaks stones on the road, while successful robbery or successful gambling rolls by at its ease, cigar in mouth, lolling on the cushions of its luxurious carriage. If you stick to honest industry all your life long, you may go on breaking stones contentedly for the whole term of your natural existence. But if you speculate boldly with your week's earnings and land a haul, you may set another fellow to break stones for

you in time, and then you become at once a respectable man, a capitalist, and a baronet. All the great fortunes we see in the world have been piled up in the last resort, if you'll only believe it, by successful gambling."

"Every man has a right to his own opinion," Warren Relf answered with a more serious air, as he turned aside to look after the rigging. "I admit there's a great deal of gambling in business; but anyhow, honest industry's a simple necessary on board the *Mud-Turtle*.—Come aft, here, will you, from your topsy-turvy moral philosophy, and help me out with this sheet and the mainsail. Before we reach the German Ocean, you'll have the whole art of navigation at your fingers' ends—for I mean to sketch while you manage the ship—and be in a position to write an ode in a Catalonian metre on the Pleasures of Luffing, and the True Delight of the Thames Waterway."

Massinger turned to do as he was directed, and to inspect the temporary floating hotel in which he was to make his way contentedly down to the coast of Suffolk. The *Mud-Turtle* was indeed as odd-looking and original

a little craft as her owner and skipper had proclaimed her to be. A centre-board yawl, of seventeen tons registered burden, she ranked as a yacht only by courtesy, on the general principle of what the logicians call excluded middle. If she wasn't that, why, then, pray what in the world was she? The *Mud-Turtle* measured almost as broad across the beam as she reckoned feet in length from stem to stern; and her skipper maintained with profound pride that she couldn't capsize in the worst storm that ever blew out of an English sky, even if she tried to. She drew no more than three feet of water at a pinch; and though it was scarcely true, as Relf had averred, that a heavy dew was sufficient to float her, she could at least go anywhere that a man could wade up to his knees without fear of wetting his tucked-up breeches. This made her a capital boat for a marine artist to go about sketching in; for Relf could lay her alongside a wreck on shallow sands, or run her up a narrow creek after picturesque waterfowl, or approach the riskiest shore to the very edge of the cliffs, without any reference to the state of the tide, or

the probable depth of the surrounding channel.

"If she grounds," the artist said enthusiastically, expatiating on her merits to his new passenger, "you see it doesn't really matter twopence; for the next high tide'll set her afloat again within six hours. She's a great opportunist: she knows well that all things come in time to him who can wait. The *Mud-Turtle* positively revels in mud; she lies flat on it as on her native heath, and stays patiently without one word of reproach for the moon's attraction to come in its round to her ultimate rescue."

The yawl's accommodation was opportunist too: though excellent in kind, it was limited in quantity, and by no means unduly luxurious in quality. She was a working-man's yacht, and she meant business. Her deck was calculated on the most utilitarian principles —just big enough for two persons to sketch abreast; her cabin contained three wooden bunks, with their appropriate complement of rugs and blankets; and a small and primitive open stove devoted to the service of the ship's cookery, took up almost all the vacant space

in the centre of the well, leaving hardly room for the self-sacrificing volunteer who undertook the functions of purveyor and bottle-washer to turn about in. But the lockers were amply stored with fresh bread, tinned meats, and other simple necessaries for a week's cruise; while food for the mind existed on a small shelf at the stern in the crude shape of the "Coaster's Companion," the Sailing Directions issued by authority of the Honourable Brethren of the Trinity House, and the charts of the Thames, constructed from the latest official surveys of Her Majesty's Board of Admiralty. Thus equipped and accoutred Warren Relf was accustomed to live an out-door life for weeks together with his one like-minded chum and companion; and if the spray was sometimes rather moist, and the yellow fog rather thick and slabby, and the early mornings rather chill and raw, and the German Ocean rather loppy and aggressive on the digestive faculties, yet the good dose of fresh air, the delicious salty feeling of the free breeze, and the perpetual sense of ease and lightness that comes with yachting, were more than enough fully to atone to an en-

thusiastic marine artist for all these petty passing inconveniences.

As for Hugh Massinger, a confirmed landsman, the first few hours' sail down the crowded Thames appeared to him at the outset a perfect phantasmagoria of ever varying perils and assorted terrors. He composed his soul to instant death from the very beginning. Not, indeed, that he minded one bit for that: the poet dearly loved danger, as he loved all other forms of sensation and excitement: they were food for the Muse; and the Muse, like Blanche Amory, is apt to exclaim, "Il me faut des émotions!" But the manifold novel forms of enterprise as the lumbering little yawl made her way clumsily among the great East-Indiamen and big ocean-going steamers, darting boldly now athwart the very bows of a huge Monarch-liner, insinuating herself now with delicate precision between the broadsides of two heavy Rochester barges, and just escaping collision now with some laden collier from Cardiff or Newcastle, were too complicated and too ever-pressing at the first blush for Massinger fully to take in their meaning at a single glance.

The tidal Thames is the Cheapside of the ocean, a mart of many nations, resorting to it by sea and by land. It's all very well going down the river on the Antwerp packet or the outward-bound New-Zealander; you steam then at your ease along the broad unencumbered central channel, with serene confidence that a duly qualified pilot stands at your helm, and that everybody else will gladly give way to you, for the sake of saving their own bacon. But it's quite another matter to thread your way tortuously through that thronged and bustling highway of the shipping interest in a centre-board yawl of seventeen tons registered burden, manned by a single marine artist and an amateur passenger of uncertain seamanship. Hugh Massinger was at once amused and bewildered by the careless confidence with which his seafaring friend dashed boldly in and out among brigs and schooners, smacks and steamships, on port or starboard tack, in endless confusion, backing the little *Mud-Turtle* to hold her own in the unequal contest against the biggest and swiftest craft that sailed the river. His opinion of Relf rose

rapidly many degrees in mental register as he watched him tacking and luffing and scudding and darting with cool unconcern in his toy tub among so many huge and swiftly moving monsters.

"Port your helm!" Relf cried to him hastily once, as they crossed the channel just abreast of Greenwich Hospital. "Here's another sudden death down upon us round the Reach yonder!" And even as he spoke, a big coal-steamer, with a black diamond painted allusively on her bulky funnel, turning the low point of land that closed their view, bore hastily down upon them from the opposite direction with menacing swiftness. Massinger, doing his best to obey orders, grew bewildered after a time by the glib rapidity of his friend's commands. He was perfectly ready to act as he was bid when once he understood his instructions; but the seafaring mind seems unable to comprehend that landsmen do not possess an intuitive knowledge of the strange names bestowed by technical souls upon ropes, booms, gaffs, and mizzen-masts; so that Massinger's attempts to carry out his orders in a prodigious hurry proved produc-

tive for the most part rather of blank confusion than of the effect intended by the master skipper. After passing Greenhithe, however, they began to find the channel somewhat clearer, and Relf ceased for a while to skip about the deck like the little hills of the Psalmist, while Massinger felt his life comparatively safe at times for three minutes together, without a single danger menacing him ahead in the immediate future from port or starboard, from bow or stern, from brig or steamer, from grounding or collision.

About two o'clock, after a hot run, they cast anchor a while out of the main channel, where traders ply their flow of intercourse, and stood by to eat their lunch in peace and quietness under the lee of a projecting point near Gravesend.

"If wind and tide serve like this," Relf observed philosophically, as he poured out a glassful of beer into a tin mug—the *Mud-Turtle's* appointments were all of the homeliest —"we ought to get down to Whitestrand before an easy breeze with two days' sail, sleeping the nights in the quiet creeks at Leigh and Orfordness."

"That would exactly suit me," Massinger answered, draining off the mugful at a gulp after his unusual exertion. "I wrote a hasty line to my cousin in Suffolk this morning telling her I should probably reach Whitestrand the day after to-morrow, wind and weather permitting.—I approve of your ship, Relf, and of your tinned lobster too. It's fun coming down to the great deep in this unconventional way. The regulation yacht, with sailors and a cook and a floating drawing-room, my soul wouldn't care for. You can get drawing-rooms galore any day in Belgravia; but picnicking like this, with a spice of adventure in it, falls in precisely with my own view of the ends of existence."

"It's a cousin you're going down to Suffolk to see, then?"

"Well, yes; a cousin—a sort of a cousin: a Girton girl; the newest thing out in women. I call her a cousin for convenience' sake. Not too nearly related, if it comes to that; a surfeit of family's a thing to be avoided. But we're a decadent tribe, the tribe of Massinger; hardly any others of us left alive; when I put on my hat, I cover all

that remains of us; and cousinhood's a capital thing in its way to keep up under certain conditions. It enables a man to pay a pretty girl a great deal of respectful attention, without necessarily binding himself down in the end to anything definite in the matrimonial direction."

"That's rather a cruel way of regarding it, isn't it?"

"Well, my dear boy, what's a man to do in these jammed and crushed and overcrowded days of ours? Nature demands the safety-valve of a harmless flirtation. If one can't afford to marry, the natural affections *will* find an outlet, on a cousin or somebody. But it's quite impossible, as things go nowadays, for a penniless man to dream of taking to wife a penniless woman and living on the sum of their joint properties. According to Cocker, nought and nought make nothing. So one must just wait till one's chance in life turns up, one way or the other. If you make a fluke some day, and paint a successful picture, or write a successful book, or get off a hopeless murderer at the Old Bailey, or invent a new nervous disease for women, or

otherwise rise to sudden fortune by any one of the usual absurd roads, then you can marry your pretty cousin or other little girl in a lordly way out of your own resources. If not, you must just put up with the plain daughter of an eminent alderman in the wine and spirit business, or connected with tallow, or doing a good thing in hides, and let her hard cash atone vicariously for your own want of tender affection. When a man has no patrimony, he must obviously make it up in matrimony. Only, the great point to avoid is letting the penniless girl meanwhile get too deep a hold upon your personal feelings. The wisest men—like me, for example—are downright fools when it comes to high play on the domestic instincts. Even Achilles had a vulnerable point, you know. So has every wise man. With Achilles, it was the heel; with us, it's the heart. The heart will wreck the profoundest and most deliberate philosopher living. I acknowledge it myself. I ought to wait, of course, till I catch the eminent alderman's richly endowed daughter. Instead of that, I shall doubtless fling myself away like a born fool upon the

pretty cousin or some other equally unprofitable investment."

"Well, I hope you will," Relf answered, cutting himself a huge chunk of bread with his pocket clasp-knife. "I'm awfully glad to hear you say so. For your own sake, I hope you'll keep your word. I hope you won't stifle everything you've got that's best within you for the sake of money and position and success.—Have a bit of this corned beef, will you?—A woman who sells herself for money is bad enough, though it's woman's way—they've all been trained to it for generations. But a man who sells himself for money—who takes himself to market for the highest bidder—who makes capital out of his face and his manners and his conversation—is absolutely contemptible, and nothing short of it.—I could never go on knowing you, if I thought you capable of it. But I don't think you so. I'm sure you do yourself a gross injustice. You're a great deal better than you pretend yourself. If the occasion ever actually arose, you'd follow your better and not your worse nature.—I'll trouble you for the mustard."

Massinger passed it, and pretended to feel awfully bored. "I'm sure I don't know," he answered; "I shall wait and see. I don't undertake either to read or to guide my own character. According to the fashionable modern doctrine, it was all settled for me irrevocably beforehand by my parents and grandparents in past generations. I merely stand by and watch where it leads me, with passive resignation and silent curiosity. The attitude's not entirely devoid of plot-interest. It's amusing to sit, like the gods of Epicurus, enthroned on high, and look down from without with critical eyes upon the gradual development on the stage of life of one's own history and one's own idiosyncrasy."

CHAPTER III.

ARCADIA.

The village of Whitestrand, on the Suffolk coast—an oasis in a stretch of treeless desert—was, and is, one of the remotest and most primitive spots to be found anywhere on the shores of England. The railways, running inland away to the west, have left it for ages far in the lurch; and even the two or three belated roads that converge upon it from surrounding villages lead nowhere. It is, so to speak, an absolute terminus. The World's End is the whimsical title of the last house at Whitestrand. The little river Char that debouches into the sea just below the church, with its scattered group of thatched cottages, cuts off the hamlet effectually with its broad estuary from the low stretch of reclaimed and sluice-drained pasture-land of wiry grass that

rolls away to southward. On the north, a rank salt marsh hems it in with broad flats of sedge and thrift and wan sea-lavender; and eastward, the low line of the German Ocean spreads dimly in front its shallow horizon on the very level of the beach and the village. Only to the west is there any dry land, a sandy heath across whose barren surface the three roads from the neighbouring hamlets meander meaninglessly by tortuous curves towards the steeple of Whitestrand. All around, the country lies flat, stale, and singularly unprofitable. The village, in fact, occupies a tiny triangular peninsula of level ground, whose isthmus is formed by the narrow belt of heath-clad waste which alone connects it with the outer universe.

The very name Whitestrand, as old as the days of the Danish invasion of East Anglian plain, at once describes the one striking and noteworthy feature of the entire district. It has absolutely no salient point of its own of any sort, except the hard and firm floor of pure white sand that extends for miles and miles on either side of the village. The sands begin at the diked land south of the

river—rescued from the tide by Oliver's Dutch engineers—and narrowing gradually as they pass northward, disappear altogether into low muddy cliff some four or five miles beyond the church of Whitestrand. No strip of coast anywhere in England can boast such a splendid beach of uniform whiteness, firmness, and solidity. At Whitestrand itself, the sands extend for three-quarters of a mile seaward at low tide, and are so smooth and compact in their consistent level, that a horse can gallop over them at full speed without leaving so much as the mark of a hoof upon the even surface of that natural arena. Whitestranders are enormously proud of their beach; the people of Walberswick, a rival village some miles off, with a local reputation for what passes in Suffolk as rural picturesqueness, maliciously declare this is because the poor Whitestranders—heaven help them!—have nothing else on earth to be proud of. Such remarks, however, savour no doubt of mere neighbourly jealousy; the Walberswick folk, having no beach at all of their own to brag about, are therefore naturally intolerant of beaches in other places.

All Whitestrand—what there was left of it—belonged to Mr. Wyville Meysey. His family had bought the manor and estate a hundred years before, from their elder representatives, when the banking firm of Meysey's in the Strand was in the first heydey of its financial glory. Unhappily for him, his particular ancestor, a collateral member of the great house, had preferred the respectable position of a country gentleman to an active share in the big concern in London. From that day forth, the sea had been steadily eating away the Meysey estate, till very little was left of it now but salt marsh and sandhills and swampy pasture-lands.

It was Tuesday when Hugh Massinger and Warren Relf set sail from the Tower on their voyage in the *Mud-Turtle* down the crowded tidal Thames; on Thursday morning, two pretty girls sat together on the roots of an old gnarled poplar that overhung the exact point where the Char empties itself into the German Ocean. The Whitestrand poplar, indeed, had formed for three centuries a famous landmark to seafaring men who

coast round the inlets of the Eastern Counties. In the quaint words of the old county historian, it rose "from the manor of Whitestrand straight up towards the kingdom of heaven;" and round its knotted roots and hollow trunk the current ran fierce at the turn of the tides, for it formed the one frail barrier to the encroachment of the sea on that portion of the low and decaying Suffolk coast-line. Everybody had known the Whitestrand poplar as a point to sail by ever since the spacious days of great Elizabeth. When you get in a line with the steeple of Walberswick, with the windmill on Snade Hill opening to the right, you can run straight up the mouth of Char towards the tiny inland port of Woodford. Vessels of small burden in distress off the coast in easterly gales often take shelter in this little creek as a harbour of refuge from heavy weather on the German Ocean.

The elder of the two girls who sat together picturesquely on this natural rustic seat was dark and handsome, and so like Hugh Massinger himself in face and feature, that no one would have had much difficulty in

recognizing her for the second cousin of whom he had spoken, Elsie Challoner. Her expression was more earnest and serious, to be sure, than the London poet's; her type of beauty was more tender and true; but she had the same large melting pathetic eyes, the same melancholy and chiselled mouth, the same long black wiry hair, and the same innate grace of bearing and manner in every movement as her Byronic relative. The younger girl, her pupil, was fairer and shorter, a pretty and delicate blonde of eighteen, with clear blue eyes and wistful mouth, and a slender but dainty girlish figure. They sat hand in hand on the roots of the tree, half overarched by its hollow funnel, looking out together over the low flat sea, whose fresh breeze blew hard in their faces, with the delicious bracing coolness and airiness peculiar to the shore of the German Ocean. There is no other air in all England to equal that strong air of Suffolk; it seems to blow right through and through one, and to brush away the dust and smoke of town from all one's pores with a single whiff of its clear bright purity.

"How do you think your cousin'll come, Elsie?" the younger girl asked, twisting her big straw hat by its strings carelessly in her hands. "I expect he'll drive over in a carriage from Daw's from the Almundham Station."

"I'm sure I don't know, dear," the elder and darker answered with a smile. "But how awfully interested you seem to be, Winifred, in this celebrated cousin of mine! What a thing it is for a man to be a poet! You've talked of nothing else the whole morning."

Winifred laughed. "Cousins are so very rare in this part of the country, you see," she said apologetically. "We don't get sight of a cousin, you know—or, for the matter of that, of any other male human being, erect upon two legs, and with a beard on his face—twice in a twelvemonth. The live young man is rapidly becoming an extinct animal in these parts, I believe. He exists only in the form of a photograph. We shall soon have him stuffed, whenever we catch him, or exhibit a pair of his boots, with a label attached, in a glass case at all the museums,

side by side with the dodo and the something-or-other-osaurian. A live young man in a tourist suit is quite a rarity, I declare, nowadays. And then a poet too! I never in my life set eyes yet upon a genuine all-wool unadulterated poet.—And you say he's handsome, extremely handsome! Handsome, and a poet, and a live young man, all at once, like three gentlemen rolled into one, as Mrs. Malaprop says: that's really something to make one's self excited about."

"Winifred! Winifred! you naughty bad girl!" Elsie laughed out, half in jest and half in earnest, "moderate your transports. You've got no sense of propriety in you, I do believe—and no respect for your instructress's dignity either. I oughtn't to let you talk on like that. It isn't becoming in the guardian of youth. The guardian of youth ought sternly to insist on due reticence in speaking of strangers, especially when they belong to the male persuasion.—But as it's only Hugh, after all, I suppose it really doesn't matter. I look upon Hugh, Winnie, like my own brother."

"What a jolly name, Hugh!" Winifred

cried, enthusiastically. "It goes so awfully well together, too, Hugh Massinger. There's a great deal in names going well together. I wouldn't marry a man called Adair, now, Elsie, or O'Dowd, either, not if you were to pay me for it (though why you should pay me, I'm sure I don't know), for Winifred Adair doesn't sound a bit nice; and yet Elsie Adair goes just beautifully.—Winifred Challoner—that's not bad, either. Three syllables, with the accent on the first. Winifred Massinger—that sounds very well too; best of all, perhaps. I shouldn't mind marrying a man named Massinger."

"Other things equal," Elsie put in laughing.

"Oh, of course he must have a moustache," Winifred went on in quite a serious voice. "Even if a man was a poet, and was called Massinger, and had lovely eyes, and could sing like a nightingale, but hadn't a moustache —a beautiful, long, wiry, black moustache, like the curate's at Snade—I wouldn't for the world so much as look at him. No close-shaven young man need apply. I insist upon a moustache as absolutely indispensable. Not red: red is quite inadmissible. If ever

I marry—and I suppose I shall have to, some day, to please papa—I shall lay it down as a fixed point in the settlements, or whatever you call them, that my husband must have a black moustache, and must bind himself down by contract beforehand as long as I live never to shave it."

Elsie shaded her eyes with her hand and looked out seaward. "I shan't let you talk so any more, Winnie," she said, with a vigorous effort to be sternly authoritative. "It isn't right; and you know it isn't. The instructress of youth must exert her authority. We ought to be as grave as a couple of church owls.—What a funny small sailing-boat that is on the sea out yonder! A regular little tub! So flat and broad! She's the roundest boat I ever saw in my life. How she dances about like a walnut-shell on the top of the water!"

"Oh, that's the *Mud-Turtle!*" Winifred cried eagerly, anxious to display her nautical knowledge to the full extent before Elsie, the town-bred governess. "She's a painter's yawl, you know. I've seen her often. She belongs to an artist, a marine artist, who

comes this way every summer to sketch and paint mud-banks. He lies by up here in the shallows of the creek, and does, oh, the funniest little pictures you ever saw, all full of nothing—just mud and water and weeds and herons—or else a great dull flat stretch of calm sea, with a couple of gulls and a buoy in the foreground. They're very clever, I suppose, for people who understand those things; but, like the crater of Vesuvius, there's nothing in them. She can go anywhere, though, even in a ditch—the *Mud-Turtle* can; and she sails like a bird, when she's got all her canvas on. You should just see her in a good breeze, putting out to sea before a fresh sou'-wester!"

"She's coming in here now, I think," Elsie murmured, half aloud.—"Oh no, she's not; she's gone beyond it, towards the point at Walberswick."

"That's only to tack," Winifred answered with conscious pride in her superior knowledge. "She's got to tack because of the wind, you know. She'll come up the creek as soon as she catches the breeze. She'll luff soon.—Look there, now; they're luffing her.

Then in a minute they'll put her about a bit, and tack again for the creek's mouth.—There you are, you see: she's tacking, as I told you. —That's the artist, the shorter man in the sailor's jersey. He looks like a common A.B. when he's got up so in his seafaring clothes; but when you hear him speak, you can tell at once by his voice he's really a gentleman. I don't know who the second man is, though, the tall man in the tweed suit—he's not the one that generally comes—that's Mr. Potts. But, oh, isn't he handsome! I wonder if they're going to sail close alongside. I do hope they are. The water's awfully deep right in by the poplar here. If they turn up the creek, they'll run under the roots just below us. —They seem to be making signs to us now. —Why, Elsie, the man in the tweed suit's waving his hand to you!"

Elsie's face was crimson to look upon. As the instructress of youth, she felt herself distinctly discomposed. "It's my cousin," she cried, jumping up in a tremor of excitement, and waving back to him eagerly with her tiny handkerchief. "It's Hugh Massinger! How very delightful! He must have come down by sea with the painter."

"They're going to run in just close by the tree," Winifred exclaimed, quite excited also at the sudden apparition of the real live poet. "Oh, Elsie, doesn't he just look poetical! A man with a face and eyes like that couldn't help writing poetry, even if he didn't want to. He must be a friend of Mr. Relf's, I suppose. What a lovely, romantic, poetical way to come down from London—tossing about at sea in a glorious breeze on a wee bit of a tub like that funny little *Mud-Turtle!*"

By this time, the yawl, with the breeze in her sails, had run rapidly before the wind for the mouth of the river, and was close upon them by the roots of the poplar. As it neared the tree, Hugh stood up on the deck, bronzed and ruddy with his three days' yachting, and called out cheerily in a loud voice, "Hullo, Elsie, this is something like a welcome! We arrive at the port, after a stormy passage on the high seas, and are met at its mouth by a deputation of the leading inhabitants. Shall we take you on board with your friend at once, and carry you up the rest of the way to Whitestrand?"

Elsie's heart came up into her mouth. She

would have given the world to be able to cry out cordially, "Oh, Hugh, that'd be just lovely;" but propriety and a sense of the duties of her position compelled her instead to answer in a set voice, "Well, thank you; it's ever so kind of you, Hugh; but we're here in our own grounds, you know, already.—This is Miss Meysey, Winifred Meysey: Winnie, this is my cousin Hugh, dear. Now you know one another.—Hugh, I'm so awfully glad to see you!"

Warren Relf turned the bow toward the tree, and ran the yawl close alongside till her tiny taffrail almost touched the roots of the big poplar. "That's better," he said.—"Now, Massinger, introduce us. You do it like a Lord Chamberlain, I know.—You won't come up with us, then, Miss Challoner?"

Elsie bent her head. "We mustn't," she said candidly, "though I own I should like it. —It's so very long since I've seen you, Hugh. Where are you going to stop at in the village? You must come up this very afternoon to see me."

Hugh bowed a bow of profound acquiescence. "If you say so," he answered with

less languor than his wont, "your will is law. We shall certainly come up.—I suppose I may bring my friend Relf with me—the owner and skipper of this magnificent and luxurious vessel?—We've had the most delightful passage down, Elsie. In future, in fact, I mean to live permanently upon a yawl. It's glorious fun. You sail all day before the free, free breeze; and you dodge the steamers that try to run you down; and you put up at night in a convenient creek; and you sleep like a top on the bare boards; and you live upon sea-biscuit and bottled beer and the fresh sea-air; and you feel like a king or a Berserker or a street arab; and you wonder why the dickens you were ever such a stupid fool before as to wear black clothes, and lie on a feather-bed, and use a knife and fork, and eat olives and *pâté de foie gras*, and otherwise give way to the ridiculous foibles of an effete and superannuated western civilization. I never in my life felt anything like it. The blood of the old Sea-kings comes up in my veins, and I've been rhyming 'viking' and 'liking,' and 'striking' and 'diking,' ever since we got well clear of London Bridge, till

this present moment.—I shall write a volume of 'Sonnets of the Sea,' and dedicate them duly to you—and Miss Meysey."

As for Winifred, with a red rose spreading over all her face, she said nothing; but twirling her hat still in her hand, she gazed and gazed open-eyed, and almost open-mouthed—except that an open mouth is so very unbecoming—upon the wonderful stranger with the big dark eyes, who had thus dropped down from the clouds upon the manor of Whitestrand. He was handsome, indeed—as handsome as her dearest dreams; he had a black moustache, strictly according to contract; and he talked with an easy off-hand airy grace—the easy grace of the Cheyne Row Club—that was wholly foreign to all her previous experience of the live young man of the county of Suffolk. His tongue was the pen of a ready writer. He poured forth language with the full and regular river-like flow of a practised London journalist and first-leader hand. Crisp adjectives to him came easy as "Yes" or "No," and epigram flowed from his lips like water.

"I'll put her in nearer," Warren Relf said

quietly, after a few minutes, glancing with mute admiration at Elsie's beautiful face and slim figure.—"We're in no hurry to go, of course, Massinger; we've got the whole day all free before us.—That's the best of navigating your own craft you see, Miss Challoner; it makes you independent of all the outer world beside. Bradshaw ceases to exercise over you his iron tyranny. You've never to catch the four-twenty. You go where you like; you stop when you please; you start when you choose; and if, when you get there, you don't like it, why, you simply go on again till you reach elsewhere. It's the freest life, this life on the ocean wave, that ever was imagined; though I believe Byron has said the same thing already.—We'll lie by here for half an hour, Hugh, and if you prefer it, I'll put you ashore, and you can walk up through the grounds of the Hall, while I navigate the ship to the Fisherman's Rest, up yonder at Whitestrand."

As he spoke, he put over the boom for a moment, to lay her in nearer to the roots of the tree. It was an unlucky movement. Winifred was sitting close to the water's edge,

with her hat in her hand, dangling over the side. The boom, flapping suddenly in the wind with an unexpected twirl, struck her wrist a smart blow, and made her drop the hat with a cry of pain into the current of the river. Tide was on the ebb; and almost before they had time to see what had happened, the hat had floated on the swift stream far out of reach, and was careering hastily in circling eddies on its way seaward.

Hugh Massinger was too good an actor, and too good a swimmer into the bargain, to let slip such a splendid opportunity for a bit of cheap and effective theatrical display. The eyes of Europe and of Elsie were upon him—not to mention the unknown young lady, who, for aught he knew to the contrary, might perhaps turn out to be a veritable heiress to the manor of Whitestrand. He had on his old gray tourist knickerbocker suit, which had seen service, and would be none the worse, if it came to that, for one more wetting. In a second, he had pulled off his coat and boots, sprung lightly to the further deck of the *Mud-Turtle*, and taken a header in his knickerbockers and stockings and flannel

shirt into the muddy water. In nothing does a handsome man look handsomer than in knickerbockers and flannels. The tide was setting strong in a fierce stream round the corner of the tree, and a few stout strokes, made all the stouter by the consciousness of an admiring trio of spectators, brought the eager swimmer fairly abreast of the truant hat in mid-current. He grasped it hastily in his outstretched hand, waved it with a flourish high above his head, and gave it a twist or two of playful triumph, all wet and dripping, in his graceful fingers, before he turned. An act of daring is nothing if not gracefully or masterfully performed.—And then he wheeled round to swim back to the yawl again.

In that, however, he had reckoned clearly without his host. The water proved in fact a most inhospitable entertainer. Hand over hand, he battled hard against the rapid current, tying the recovered hat loosely around his neck by its ribbon strings, and striking out vigorously with his cramped and trammelled legs in the vain effort to stem and breast the rushing water. For a minute or so he struggled manfully with the tide,

putting all his energy into each stroke of his thighs, and making his muscles ache with the violence of his efforts. But it was all to no purpose. The stream was too strong for him. Human thews could never bear it down. After thirty or forty strokes, he looked in front of him casually, and saw, to his surprise, not to say discomfiture, that he was farther away from the yawl than ever. This was distressing—this was even ignominious; to any other man than Hugh Massinger, it would indeed have been actually alarming. But to Hugh the ignominy was far more than the peril: he was so filled with the sentimental and personal side of the difficulty—the consciousness that he was showing himself off to bad advantage before the eyes of two beautiful girls—that he never even dreamt of the serious danger of being swept out to sea and there drowned helplessly. He only thought to himself how ridiculous and futile he must needs look to that pair of womankind in having attempted with so light a heart a feat that was utterly beyond his utmost powers.

Vanity is a mighty ruler of men. If Hugh

Massinger had stopped there till he died, he would never have called aloud for help. Better death with honour, on the damp bed of a muddy stream, than the shame and sin of confessing one's self openly beaten in fair fight by a mere insignificant tidal river. It was Elsie who first recognized the straits he was in—for though love is blind, yet love is sharp-eyed—and cried out to Warren Relf in an agony of fear: "He can't get back! The stream's too much for him!—Quick, quick! You've not a moment to lose! Put about the boat at once and save him!"

With a hasty glance, Relf saw she was right, and that Hugh was unable to battle successfully with the rapid current. He turned the yawl's head with all speed outward, and took a quick tack to get behind the baffled swimmer and intercept him, if possible, on his way toward the sea, whither he was now so quickly and helplessly drifting.

CHAPTER IV.

BURIDAN'S ASS.

For a minute the two girls stood in breathless suspense; then Warren Relf, cutting in behind with the yawl, flung out a coil of rope in a ring towards Hugh with true seafaring dexterity, so that it struck the water straight in front of his face flat like a quoit, enabling him to grasp it and haul himself in without the slightest difficulty. The help came in the nick of time, yet most inopportunely. Hugh would have given worlds just then to be able to disregard his proffered aid, and to swim ashore by the tree in lordly independence without extraneous assistance. It is grotesque to throw yourself wildly in, like a hero or a Leander, and then have to be tamely pulled out again by another fellow. But he recognized the fact that the

struggle was all in vain, and that the interests of English literature and of a well-known insurance office in which he held a small life policy, imperatively demanded acquiescence on his part in the friendly rescue. He grasped the rope with a very bad grace indeed, and permitted Relf to haul him in, hand over hand, to the side of the *Mud-Turtle*.

Yet, as soon as he stood once more on the yawl's deck, dripping and unpicturesque in his clinging clothes, but with honour safe, and the lost hat now clasped tight in his triumphant right hand, it began to occur to him that, after all, the little adventure had turned out in its way quite as romantic, not to say effective, as could have been reasonably expected. He did not know the current ran so fast, or perhaps he would never have attempted the Quixotic task of recovering that plain straw hat with the blue ribbon—worth at best half-a-crown net—from its angry eddies; yet the very fact that he had exposed himself to danger, real danger, however unwittingly, on a lady's behalf, for so small a cause, threw a not unpleasing dash of

romance and sentiment into his foolish and foolhardy bit of theatrical gallantry. To risk your life for a plain straw hat—and for a lady's sake—smacks, when one comes to think of it, of antique chivalry. He forgave himself his wet and unbecoming attire, as he handed the hat, with as graceful a bow as circumstances permitted, from the yawl's side to Winifred Meysey, who stretched out her hands, all blushes and thanks and apologetic regrets, from the roots of the poplar by the edge, to receive it.

"And now, Elsie," Hugh cried, with such virile cheerfulness as a man can assume who stands shivering in wet clothes before a keen east wind, "perhaps we'd better make our way at once up to Whitestrand without further delay to change our garments. Hood makes garments rhyme under similar conditions to 'clinging like cerements,' and I begin to perceive now the wisdom of his allusion. A very bad rhyme, but very good reason. They *do* cling, if you'll permit me to say so—they cling, indeed, a trifle unpleasantly. Good-bye for the present. I'll see you again this afternoon in a drier and, I

hope, a more becoming costume.—Miss Meysey, I'm afraid your hat's spoiled.—Put her about now, Relf. Let's run up quick. I don't mind how soon I get to Whitestrand."

Warren Relf headed the yawl round with the wind, and they ran merrily before the stiff breeze up stream towards the village. Meanwhile, Hugh stood still on the deck in his dripping clothes, smiling as benignly as if nothing had happened, and waving farewell with one airy hand—in spite of chattering teeth—to Elsie and Winifred. The two girls, taken aback by the incident, looked after them with arms clasped round one another's waists. Winifred was the first to break abruptly the hushed silence of their joint admiration.

"Oh, Elsie," she cried, "it *was* so grand! Wasn't it just magnificent of him to jump in like that after my poor old straw? I never saw anything so lovely in my life. Exactly like the sort of things one reads about in novels!"

Elsie smiled a more sober smile of maturer appreciation. "Hugh's always so," she answered, with proprietary pride in her

manly and handsome and chivalrous cousin. "He invariably does just the right thing at just the right moment; it's a way he has. Nobody else has such splendid manners. He's the dearest, nicest, kindest-hearted fellow——" She checked herself suddenly, with a flushed face, for she felt her own transports needed moderating now, and her praise was getting perhaps somewhat beyond the limits of due laudation as expected from cousins. A governess, even when she comes from Girton, must rise, like Cæsar's wife, above suspicion. It must be generally understood in her employer's family, that, though apparently possessed of a circulating fluid like other people's, she carries no such compromising and damaging an article as a heart about with her. And yet, if, as somebody once observed, there's "a deal of human nature in man," is it not perhaps just equally true that there's a deal of the selfsame perilous commodity in woman also?

The men made their way up stream to Whitestrand, and landed at last, with an easy run, beside the little hithe. At the village inn—the Fisherman's Rest, by

W. Stannaway—Hugh Massinger, in spite of his disreputable dampness, soon obtained comfortable board and lodging, on Warren Relf's recommendation. Relf was in the habit of coming to Whitestrand frequently, and was "well-beknown," as the landlord remarked, to the entire village, children included, so that any of his friends was immediately welcome at the quaint old public-house by the water's edge. For his own part the painter preferred the freedom of the yawl, where he paid of course neither rent nor taxes, and came and went at his own free-will; but as Massinger, not being a "vagrom man," meant to spend his entire summer holiday in harness at Whitestrand, he desired to have some more settled *pied-à-terre* for his literary labours than the errant *Mud-Turtle*.

"I'll change my clothes in a jiffy," the poet cried to his friend as he leapt ashore, "and be back with you at once, a new creature.—Relf, you'll stop and have some lunch, of course.—Landlord, we'd like a nice tender steak—you can raise a steak at Whitestrand, I suppose?—That's well. Under-

done, if you please.—Just hand me out my portmanteau there.—Thank you, thank you." And with a graceful bound, he was off to his room—a low-roofed old chamber on the ground-floor—as airy and easy as if nothing had ever occurred at all to ruffle his temper or disturb the affectedly careless set of his immaculate collar and his loosely knotted necktie.

In ten minutes he emerged again, as he had predicted, in the front room, another man—an avatar of glory—resplendent in a light-brown velveteen coat and Rembrandt cap, that served still more obviously than ever to emphasize the full nature and extent of his poetical pretensions. It was a coat that a laureate might have envied and dreamt about. The man who could carry such a coat as that could surely have written the whole of the "Divina Commedia" before breakfast, and tossed off a book or two of "Paradise Lost" in a brief interval of morning leisure.

"Awfully pretty girl that," he said as he entered, and drummed on the table with impatient forefinger for the expected steak;

"the little one, I mean, of course—not my cousin. Fair, too. In some ways I prefer them fair. Though dark girls have more go in them, after all, I fancy; for dark and true and tender is the North, according to Tennyson. But fair or dark, North or South, like Horniman's teas, they're 'all good alike,' if you take them as assorted. And she's charmingly fresh and youthful and naive."

"She's pretty, certainly," Warren Relf replied with a certain amount of unusual stiffness apparent in his manner; "but not anything like so pretty, to my mind, or so graceful either, as your cousin, Miss Challoner."

"Oh, Elsie's well enough in her own way, no doubt," Hugh went on with a smile of expansive admiration. "I like them all in their own way. I'm nothing, indeed, if not catholic and eclectic. On the whole, one girl's much the same as another, if only she gives you the true poetic thrill. As Alfred de Musset calmly puts it, with delicious French bluntness, 'Qu'importe le goblet pourvu qu'on a l'ivresse?' Do you remember that delightful student song of Blackie's?

"'I can like a hundred women;
I can love a score;
Only one with heart's devotion
Worship and adore.'

I subscribe to that: all but the last two verses; about those I'm not quite so certain. As to loving a score, I've tried it experimentally, and I know I can manage it. But anyway, Elsie's extremely pretty. I've always allowed she's extremely pretty. The trouble of it is that she hasn't, unfortunately, got a brass farthing. Not a sou, not a cent, not a doit, not a stiver. I don't myself know the precise exchange value of doits and stivers, but I take them to be something exceptionally fractional. I could rhyme away (without prejudice) to Elsie and Chelsea and braes of Kelsie, or even at a pinch could bring in Selsey—you must know Selsey Bill, as you go in for yachting—if it weren't that I feel how utterly futile and purposeless it all is when a girl's fortune consists altogether of a negative quantity in doits and stivers. But the other—Miss Meysey, now—who's she, I wonder?—Good name, Meysey. It sounds like money, and it suggests daisy. There was a Meysey a banker in the Strand,

you know—not very daisy-like, that, is it?—and another who did something big in the legal way—a judge, I fancy.—He doubtless sat on the royal bench of British Themis with immense applause (which was instantly suppressed), and left his family a pot of money. Meysey—lazy—crazy—hazy. None of them'll do, you see, for a sonnet but daisy. How many more Miss Meyseys are there, if any? I wonder. And if not, has she got a brother? So pretty a girl deserves to have tin. If I were a childless, rich old man, I think I'd incontinently establish and endow her, just to improve the beauty and the future of the race, on the strictest evolutionary and Darwinian principles."

"Her father's the Squire here," Warren Relf replied, with a somewhat uneasy glance at Hugh, shot sideways. "He lords the manor and a great part of the parish. Wyville Mey ey's his full name. He's rich, they say, tolerably rich still; though a big slice of the estate south of the river has been swallowed up by the sea, or buried in the sand, or otherwise disposed of. The sea's encroaching greatly on this coast, you know;

some places, like Dunwich, have almost all toppled over bodily into the water, churches included; while in others, the shifting sand of the country has just marched over the ground like a conquering army, pitching its tent and taking up its quarters, to stay, in the meadows. Old Meysey's lost a lot of land that way, I believe, on the south side; it's covered by those pretty little wave-like sandhills you see over yonder. But north of the river, they say he's all right. That's his place, the house in the fields, just up beyond the poplar. I dare say you didn't notice it as we passed, for it's built low—Elizabethan, half hidden in the trees. All the big houses along the East coast are always planned rather squat and flat, to escape the wind, which runs riot here in the winter, the natives say, as if it blew out of the devil's bellows! But it's a fine place, the Hall, for all that, as places go, down here in Suffolk. The old gentleman's connected with the bankers in the Strand—some sort of a cousin or other, more or less distantly removed, I fancy."

"And the sons?" Hugh asked, with evident

interest, tracking the subject to its solid kernel.

"The sons? There are none. They had one once, I believe—a dragoon or hussar—but he was shot, out soldiering in Zululand or somewhere; and this daughter's now the sole living representative of the entire family."

"So she's an heiress?" Hugh inquired, getting warmer at last, as children say at hide-and-seek.

"Ye-es. In her way—no doubt, an heiress. —Not a very big one, I suppose, but still what one might fairly call an heiress. She'll have whatever's left to inherit.—You seem very anxious to know all about her."

"Oh, one naturally likes to know where one stands—before committing one's self to anything foolish," Hugh murmured placidly. "And in this wicked world of ours, where heiresses are scarce—and actions for breach of promise painfully common—one never knows beforehand where a single false step may happen to land one. I've made mistakes before now in my life; I don't mean to make another one through insufficient knowledge, if I can help it."

He took up a pen that lay upon the table of the little sitting-room before him, and began drawing idly with it some curious characters on the back of an envelope he pulled from his pocket. Relf sat and watched him in silence.

Presently, Massinger began again. "You're very much shocked at my sentiments, I can see," he said quietly, as he glanced with approval at his careless hieroglyphics.

Relf drew his hand over his beard twice. "Not so much shocked as grieved, I think," he replied after a moment's pause.

"Why grieved?"

"Well, because, Massinger, it was impossible for any one who saw her this morning to doubt that Miss Challoner is really in love with you."

Hugh went on fiddling with the pen and ink and the envelope nervously. "You think so?" he asked, with some eagerness in his voice, after another short pause. "You think she really likes me?"

"I don't merely think so," Relf answered with confidence; "I'm absolutely certain of it—as sure as I ever was of anything. Re-

member, I'm a painter, and I have a quick eye. She was deeply moved when she saw you come. It meant a great deal to her.—I should be sorry to think you would play fast and loose with any girl's affections."

"It's not the girl's affections I play fast and loose with," Massinger retorted lazily. "I deeply regret to say it's very much more my own I trifle with. I'm not a fool; but my one weak point is a too susceptible disposition. I can't help falling in love—really in love—not merely flirting—with any nice girl I happen to be thrown in with. I write her a great many pretty verses; I send her a great many charming notes; I say a great many foolish things to her; and at the time I really mean them all. My heart is just at that precise moment the theatre of a most agreeable and unaffected flutter. I think to myself, 'This time, it's serious.' I look at the moon, and feel sentimental. I apostrophise the fountains, meadows, valleys, hills, and groves to forebode not any severing of our loves. And then I go away and reflect calmly, in the solitude of my own chamber, what a precious fool I've been—for, of course,

the girl's always a penniless one—I've never had the luck or the art yet to captivate an heiress; and when it comes to breaking it all off, I assure you it costs me a severe wrench, a wrench that I wish I was sensible enough to foresee or adequately to guard against, on the prevention-better-than-cure principle.

"And the girl?" Relf asked, with a growing sense of profound discomfort, for Elsie's face and manner had instantly touched him.

"The girl," Massinger replied, putting a finishing stroke or two to the queer formless sketch he had scrawled upon the envelope, and fixing it up on the frame of a cheap lithograph that hung from a nail upon the wall opposite: "well, the girl probably regrets it also, though not, I sincerely trust, so profoundly as I do. In this case, however, it's a comfort to think Elsie's only a cousin. Between cousins there can be no harm, you will readily admit, in a little innocent flirtation."

"It's more than a flirtation to her, I'm sure," Relf answered, with a dubious shake of his head. "She takes it all *au grand sérieux*.—I hope you don't mean to give her

one of those horrid wrenches you talk so lightly about?—Why, Massinger, what on earth is this? I—I didn't know you could do this sort of thing!"

He had walked across carelessly, as he paced the room, to the lithograph in whose frame the poet had slipped the back of his envelope, and he was regarding the little addition now with eyes of profound astonishment and wonder. The picture was a coarsely executed portrait of a distinguished statesman, reduced to his shirt-sleeves, and caught in the very act of felling a tree; and on the scrap of envelope, in exact imitation of the right honourable gentleman's own familiar signature, Hugh had written in bold free letters the striking inscription, "W. E. Gladstone."

The poet laughed. "Yes, it's not so bad," he said, regarding it from one side with parental fondness. "I thought they'd probably like to have the Grand Old Man's own genuine autograph; so I've turned one out for them offhand, as good as real, and twice as legible. I flatter myself it's a decent copy. I can imitate anybody's hand at sight.

—Look here, for example; here's your own." And taking another scrap of paper from a bundle in his pocket, he wrote with rapid and practised mastery, "Warren H. Relf" on a corner of the sheet in the precise likeness of the painter's own large and flowing hand-writing.

Relf gazed over his shoulder in some surprise, not wholly unmingled with a faint touch of alarm. "I'm an artist, Massinger," he said slowly, as he scanned it close; "but I couldn't do that, no, not if you were to pay me for it. I could paint anything you chose to set me, in heaven above, or earth beneath, or the waters that are under the earth; but I couldn't make a decent fac-simile of another man's autograph.—And, do you know, on the whole, I'm awfully glad that I could never possibly learn to do it."

Massinger smiled a languid smile. "In the hands of the foolish," he said, addressing his soul to the beefsteak which had at last arrived, "no doubt such abilities are liable to serious abuse. But the wise man is an exception to all rules of life: he can safely be trusted with edge-tools. We do well in

refusing firearms to children: grown people can employ them properly. I'm never afraid of any faculty or knowledge on earth I possess. I know seventeen distinct ways of cheating at loo, without the possibility of a moment's detection, and yet that doesn't prevent me, whenever I play, from being most confoundedly out of pocket by it. The man who distrusts himself must be conscious of weakness. Depend upon it, no amount of knowledge ever hurts those who repose implicit confidence in their own prudence and their own sagacity."

CHAPTER V.

ELECTIVE AFFINITIES.

THE Girton governess of these latter days stands on a very different footing indeed in the family from the forty-pound-a-year-and-all-found young person who instructed youth as a final bid for life in the last generation. She ranks, in fact, in the unwritten table of precedence with the tutor who has been a university man; and, as the outward and visible sign of her superior position, she dines with the rest of the household at seven-thirty, instead of taking an early dinner in the schoolroom with her junior pupils off hashed mutton and rice-pudding at half-past one. Elsie Challoner had been a Girton girl. She was an orphan, left with little in the world but her brains and her good looks to found her fortune upon; and she had wisely invested

her whole small capital in getting herself an education which would enable her to earn herself in after life a moderate livelihood. In the family at Whitestrand, where she had lately come, she lived far more like a friend than a governess: the difference in years between herself and Winifred was not extreme; and the two girls, taking a fancy to one another from the very first, became companions at once, so intimate together that Elsie could hardly with an effort now and again bring herself to exert a little brief authority over the minor details of Winifred's conduct. And, indeed, the modern governess, though still debarred the possession of a heart, is now no longer exactly expected to prove herself in everything a moral dragon: she is permitted to recognize the existence of human instincts in the world we inhabit, and not even forbidden to concede at times the abstract possibility that either she or her pupils might conceivably get married to an eligible person, should the eligible person at the right moment chance to present himself, with the customary credentials as to position and prospects.

"I wonder, Elsie," Winifred said after lunch, "whether your cousin will really come up this afternoon? Perhaps he won't now, after that dreadful wetting. I dare say, as he only came down in the yawl, he hasn't got another suit of clothes with him. I shouldn't be surprised if he had to go to bed at the inn, as Mr. Relf does, while they dry his things for him by the kitchen fire! Mr. Relf never brings more, they say, than his one blue jersey."

"That's not like Hugh," Elsie answered confidently. "Hugh wouldn't go anywhere, by sea or land, without proper clothes for every possible civilized contingency. He's not a fop, you know—he's a man all over—but he dresses nicely and appropriately always. You should just see him in evening clothes; he's simply beautiful then. They suit him splendidly."

"So I should think, dear," Winifred answered with warmth.—"I wonder, Elsie, whether papa and mamma will like your cousin?"

"It's awfully good of you, darling, to think so much of what sort of reception my

cousin gets," Elsie replied with a kiss, in perfect innocence. (Winifred blushed faintly). "But, of course, your papa and mamma are sure to like him. Everybody always does like Hugh. There's something winning about him that insures success. He's a universal favourite, wherever he goes. He's so clever and so nice, and so kind and so sympathetic. I never met anybody else so sympathetic as Hugh. He knows exactly beforehand how one feels about everything, and makes allowances so cordially for all one's little private sentiments. I suppose that's the poetic temperament in him. Poetry must mean at bottom, I should think, keen insight into the emotions of others."

"But not always power of responding sympathetically to those emotions.—Look, for example, at such a case as Goethe's," a clear voice said from the other side of the hedge. They were walking along, as they often walked, with arms clasped round one another's waists, just inside the grounds, close to the footpath that led across the fields; and only a high fence of privet and dog-rose separated their confidences from the ear of the fortuitous

public on the adjoining footpath. So Hugh had come up, unawares from behind, and overheard their confidential chit-chat! How far back had he overheard? Elsie wondered to herself. If he had caught it all, she would be so ashamed of herself!

"Hugh!" she cried, running on to the little wicket gate to meet him. "I'm so glad you've come. It's delightful to see you.—But oh, you must have thought us two dreadful little sillies.—How much of our conversation did you catch, I wonder?"

"Only the last sentence," Hugh answered lightly, taking both her hands in his and kissing her a quiet cousinly kiss on her smooth broad forehead. "Just that about poetry meaning keen insight into the emotions of others; so, if you were saying any ill about me, my child, or bearing false witness against your neighbour, you may rest assured at any rate that I didn't hear it.—Good-morning, Miss Meysey. I'm recovered, you see: dried and clothed and in my right mind—at least, I hope so. I trust the hat is the same also."

Winifred held out a timid small hand.

"It's all right, thank you," she said, with a sudden flush; "but I shall never, never wear it again, for all that. I couldn't bear to. I don't think you ought to have risked your life for so very little."

"A life's nothing where a lady's concerned," Hugh answered airily with a mock bow. "But indeed you give me credit for too much gallantry. My life was not in question at all; I only risked a delightful bath, which was somewhat impeded by an unnecessarily heavy and awkward bathing-dress.—What a sweet place this is, Elsie; so flowery and bowery, when you get inside it. The little lane with the roses overhead seems created after designs by Birket Foster. From outside, I confess, to a casual observer the first glimpse of East Anglian scenery is by no means reassuring."

They strolled up slowly together to the Hall door, where the senior branches were seated on the lawn, under the shade of the one big spreading lime-tree, enjoying the delicious coolness of the breeze as it blew in fresh from the open ocean. Elsie wondered how Hugh and the Squire would get on

together; but her wonder indeed was little needed; for Hugh, as she had said, always got on admirably with everybody everywhere. He had a way of attacking people instinctively on their strong point; and in ten minutes, he and the Squire were fast friends, united by firm ties of common loves and common animosities. They were both Oxford men—at whatever yawning interval of time, that friendly link forms always a solid bond of union between youth and age; and both had been at the same college, Oriel. "I dare say you know my old rooms," the Squire observed with a meditative sigh. "They looked out over Fellows' Quad, and had a rhyming Latin hexameter on a pane of stained glass in one of the bay windows."

"I know them well," Hugh answered, with a rising smile of genuine pleasure—for he loved Oxford with a love passing the love of her ordinary children. "A friend of mine had them in my time. And I remember the line: 'Oxoniam quare venisti premeditare.' An excellent leonine, as leonines go, though limp in its quantity.—Do you know, I fell in love with that pane so greatly, that I had a

wire framework made to put over it, for fear some fellows should smash it some night, flinging about oranges at a noisy wine-party."

From Oxford, they soon got off upon Suffolk, and the encroachment of the sea, and the blown sands; and then the Squire insisted upon taking Hugh for a *tour du propriétaire* round the whole estate, with running comments upon the wasting of the foreshore and the abominable remissness of the Board of Admiralty in not erecting proper groynes to protect the interests of coast-wise proprietors. Hugh listened to it all with his grave face of profound sympathy and lively interest, putting in from time to time an acquiescent remark confirmatory of the wickedness of government officials in general, and of the delinquent Board of Admiralty in particular.

"Æolian sands!" he said once, with a lingering cadence, rolling the words on his tongue, as the Squire paused by the big poplar of that morning's adventure to point him out the blown dunes on the opposite shore—"Æolian sands! Is that what they

call them? How very poetical! What a lovely word to put in a sonnet! Æolian—just the very thing of all others to go on all-fours with an adjective like Tmolian!—So it swallowed up forty acres of prime salt-marsh pasture—did it, really? That must have been a very serious loss indeed. Forty acres of prime salt-marsh! I suppose it was the sort of land covered with tall rank reedy grasses, where you feed those magnificent rough-coated, long-horned, Highland-looking cattle we saw this morning? Splendid beasts: most picturesque and regal. 'Bulls that walk the pastures in kingly-flashing coats,' George Meredith would call them. We passed a lot of them as we cruised up stream to-day to Whitestrand.—And the sand has absolutely overwhelmed and wasted it all? Dear me! dear me! What a terrible calamity! It was the Admiralty's fault! Might make a capital article out of that to bully the government in the *Morning Telephone*."

"If you did, my dear sir," the Squire said warmly with an appreciative nod, "you'd earn the deepest gratitude of every owner of property in the county of Suffolk, and indeed

along the whole neglected East Coast.—The way we've been treated and abused, I assure you, has been just scandalous—simply scandalous. Governments, buff or blue, have all alike behaved to us with incredible levity. When the present disgraceful administration, for example, came into power——"

Hugh never heard the remainder of that impassioned harangue long since delivered with profound gusto on a dozen distinct election platforms. He was dimly aware of the Squire's voice, pouring forth denunciation of the powers that be in strident tones and measured sentences; but he didn't listen; his soul was occupied in two other far more congenial pursuits: one of them, watching Elsie and Winifred with Mrs. Meysey; the other, trying to find a practicable use for Æolian sands in connection with his latest projected heroic poem on the Burial of Alaric. Æolian; dashes: Tmolian; abashes: not a bad substratum, that, he flattered himself, for the thunderous lilt of his opening stanza.

It was not till the close of the afternoon, however, that he could snatch a few seconds alone with Elsie. They wandered off by

themselves then, near the water's edge, among the thick shrubbery; and Hugh, sitting down in a retired spot under the lee of a sheltering group of guelder-roses, took his pretty cousin's hands for a moment in his own, and looking down into her great dark eyes with a fond look, cried laughingly: "Oh, Elsie, Elsie, this is just what I've been longing for all day long. I thought I should never manage to get away from that amiable old bore, with his encroachments, and his mandamuses, and his groynes, and his interlocutors. As far as I could understand him, he wants to get the Board of Admiralty, or the Court of Chancery, or somebody else high up in station, to issue instructions to the east wind not to blow Æolian sands in future over his sacred property. It's too grotesque: quite, quite too laughable. He's trying to bring an action for trespass against the German Ocean.

"Will ye bridle the deep sea with reins? will ye chasten the high sea with rods?
Will ye take her to chain her with chains who is older than all ye gods?"

Or will you get an injunction against her in due form on stamped paper from the Lord

Chief Justice of England? Canute tried it on, and found it a failure. And all the time, while the good old soul was moaning and droning about his drowned land, there was I, just sighing and groaning to get away to a convenient corner with a pretty little cousin of mine with whom I had urgent private affairs of my own to settle.—My dear Elsie, Suffolk agrees with you. You're looking this moment simply charming."

"It's your own fault, Hugh," Elsie answered with a blush, never heeding overtly his last strictly personal observation. "You shouldn't make yourself so universally delightful. I'm sure I thought, by the way you talked with him, you were absolutely absorbed in the wasting of the cliff, and personally affronted by the aggressive east wind. I was just beginning to get quite jealous of the encroachments.—For you know, Hugh, it's such a real pleasure to me always to see you."

She spoke tenderly, with the innocent openness of old acquaintance; and Hugh, still holding her hand in his own, leaned forward with admiration in his sad dark

eyes, and put out his face close to hers, as he had always done since they were children together. "One kiss, Elsie," he said persuasively.—"Quick, my child; we may have no other chance. Those dreadful old bores will stick to us like leeches. 'Gather ye roses while you may: Old Time is still a-flying."

Elsie drew back her face half in alarm. "No, no, Hugh," she cried, struggling with him for a second. "We're both growing too old for such nonsense now. Remember, we've ceased long ago to be children."

"But as a cousin, Elsie," Hugh said with a wistful look that belied his words.

Elsie preferred in her own heart to be kissed by Hugh on different grounds; but she did not say so. She held up her face, however, with a rather bad grace, and Hugh pressed it to his own tenderly. "That's paradise, my houri," he murmured low, looking deep into her beautiful liquid eyes.

"O son of my uncle, that was paradise indeed; but that was not like a cousin," she answered with a faint attempt to echo his playfulness, as she withdrew, blushing.

Hugh laughed, and glanced idly round him with a merry look at the dancing water. "You may call it what you like," he whispered with a deep gaze into her big dark pupils. "I don't care in what capacity on earth you consider yourself kissed, so long as you still permit me to kiss you."

For ten minutes they sat there talking—saying those thousand-and-one sweet empty things that young people say to one another under such circumstances—have not we all been young, and do not we all well know them?—and then Elsie rose with a sigh of regret. "I think," she said, "we mustn't stop here alone any longer; perhaps Mrs. Meysey wouldn't like it."

"Oh, bother Mrs. Meysey!" Hugh cried, with an angry sideward toss of his head. "These old people are a terrible nuisance in the world. I wish we could get a law passed by a triumphant majority that at forty everybody was to be promptly throttled, or at least transported. There'd be some hope of a little peace and enjoyment in the world then."

"Oh, but, Hugh, Mrs. Meysey's just kind-

ness itself, and I know she'll let you come and see me ever so often. She said at lunch I might go out on the water or anywhere I liked, whenever I chose, any time with my cousin."

"A very sensible, reasonable, intelligent old lady," Hugh answered approvingly, with a mollified nod. "I wish they were all as wise in their generation. The profession of chaperon, like most others, has been overdone, and would be all the better now for a short turn of judicious thinning.—But, Elsie, you've told them I was a cousin, I see. That's quite right. Have you explained to them in detail the precise remoteness of our actual relationship?"

Elsie's lip quivered visibly. "No, Hugh," she answered. "But why? Does it matter?"

"Not at all—not at all. Very much the contrary. I'm glad you didn't. It's better so. If I were you, my child, I think, do you know, I'd allow them to believe, in a quiet sort of way—unless, of course, they ask you point-blank, that you and I are first-cousins. It facilitates social intercourse considerably. Cousinhood's such a jolly indefinite thing,

one may as well enjoy as long as possible the full benefit of its charming vagueness."

"But, Hugh, is it right? Do you think I ought to?—I mean, oughtn't I to let them know at once, just for that very reason, how slight the relationship really is between us?"

"The relationship is *not* slight," Hugh answered with warmth, darting an eloquent glance deep down into her eyes. "The relationship's a great deal closer, indeed, than if it were a much nearer one.—That may be paradox, but it's none the less true, for all that.—Still, it's no use arguing a point of casuistry with a real live Girton girl. You know as much about ethics as I do, and a great deal more into the bargain. Only, a cousin's a cousin anyhow; and I for my part wouldn't go out of my way to descend gratuitously into minute genealogical particulars of once, twice, thrice, or ten times removed, out of pure puritanism. These questions of pedigree are always tedious. What subsists all through is the individual fact that I'm Hugh, and you're Elsie, and that I love you dearly—of course with a purely cousinly degree of devotion."

"Hugh, you needn't always flourish that limitation in my face, like a broomstick."

"Caution, my dear child—mere ingrained caution—the solitary resource of poverty and wisdom. What's the good of loving you dearly on any other grounds, I should like to know, as long as poetry, divine poetry, remains a perfect drug in the publishing market? A man and a girl can't live on bread and cheese and the domestic affections, can they, Elsie? Very well, then, for the present we are both free. If ever circumstances should turn out differently——" The remainder of that sentence assumed a form inexpressible by the resources of printer's ink, even with the aid of a phonetic spelling.

When they turned aside from the guelder-roses at last with crimson faces, they strolled side by side up to the house once more, talking about the weather or some equally commonplace and uninteresting subject, and joined the Meyseys under the big tree. The Squire had disappeared, and Winifred came out to meet them on the path. "Mamma says, Mr. Massinger," she began timidly, "we're going a little picnic all by ourselves

on the river to-morrow—up among the sandhills papa was showing you. They're a delicious place to picnic in, the sandhills; and mamma thinks perhaps you wouldn't mind coming to join us, and bringing your friend the artist with you. But I dare say you won't care to come: there'll be only ourselves—just a family party."

"My tastes are catholic," Hugh answered jauntily. "I love all innocent amusements—and most wicked ones. There's nothing on earth I should enjoy as much as a picnic in the sandhills.—You'll be coming too, of course, won't you, Elsie?—Very well, then. I'll bring Relf, and the *Mud-Turtle* to boot. I know he wants to go mud-painting himself. He may as well take us all up in a body."

"We shall do nothing, you know," Winifred cried apologetically. "We shall only just sit on the sandhills and talk, or pick yellow horned-poppies, and throw stones into the sea, and behave ourselves generally like a pack of idlers."

"That'll exactly suit me," Hugh replied with a smile. "My most marked characteristics are indolence and the practice of the

Christian virtues. I hate the idea that when people invite their friends to a feast they're bound to do something or other definite to amuse them. It's an insult to one's intelligence; it's degrading one to the level of innocent childhood, which has to be kept engaged with Blindman's Buff and an unlimited supply of Everton toffee, for fear it should bore itself with its own inanity. On that ground, I consider music and games at suburban parties the resource of incompetence. Sensible people find enough to amuse them in one another's society, without playing dumb crambo or asking riddles. Relf and I will find more than enough, I'm sure, to-morrow in yours and Elsie's."

He shook hands with them all round and raised his hat in farewell with that inimitable grace which was Hugh Massinger's peculiar property. When he left the Hall that afternoon, he left four separate conquests behind him. The Squire thought this London newspaper fellow was a most sensible, right-minded, intelligent young man, with a head on his shoulders, and a complete comprehension of the rights and wrongs of the intricate

riparian proprietors' question. Mrs. Meysey thought Elsie's cousin was most polite and attentive, as well as an extremely high-principled and excellent person. (Ladies of a certain age are always strong on the matter of principles, which they discuss as though they were a definitely measurable quantity, like money or weight or degrees Fahrenheit.) Winifred thought Mr. Massinger was a born poet, and oh, so nice and kind and appreciative. Elsie thought dear darling Hugh was just the same good, sweet, sympathetic old friend and ally and comforter as ever. And they all four united in thinking he was very handsome, very clever, very brilliant, and very delightful.

As for Hugh, he thought to himself, as he sauntered back by the rose-bordered lane to the village inn, that the Squire was a most portentous and heavy old nuisance; that Mrs. Wyville Meysey was a comic old creature; that Elsie was really a most charming girl; and that Winifred, in spite of her bread-and-butter blushes, wasn't half bad, after all—for an heiress.

The heiress is apt to be plain and forbidding.

She is not fair to outward view, as many maidens be. Her beauty has solid, not to say strictly metallic qualities, and resides principally in a safe at her banker's. To have tracked down an heiress who was also pretty was indeed, Hugh felt, a valuable discovery.

When he reached the inn, he found Warren Relf just returned from a sketching expedition up the tidal flats. "Well, Relf," he cried, "you see me triumphant. I've been reconnoitring Miss Meysey's outposts, with an ultimate view to possible siege operations. To judge by the first results of my reconnaissance, she seems a very decent sort of little girl in her own way. If sonnets will carry her by storm, I don't mind discharging a few cartloads of them from a hundred-ton-gun point-blank at her outworks. Most of them can be used again, of course, in case of need, in another campaign, if occasion offers."

"And Miss Challoner?" Relf suggested, with some reproof in his tone. "Was she there too? Have you seen her also?"

"Yes, Elsie was there," the poet answered unconcernedly, as he rang the bell for a

glass of soda-water. "Elsie was there, looking as charming and as piquante and as pretty as ever; and, by Jove! she's the cleverest and brightest and most amusing girl I ever met anywhere up and down in England. Though she's my own cousin, and it's me that says it, as oughtn't to say it, she's a credit to the family. I like Elsie. At times, I've almost half a mind, upon my soul, to fling prudence to the winds, and ask her to come and accept a share of my poor crust in my humble garret.—But it won't do, you know—it won't do. *Sine Cerere et Baccho, friget Venus.* Either I must make a fortune at a stroke, or I must marry a girl with a fortune ready made to my hand already. Love in a cottage is all very well in its way, no doubt, with roses and eglantine—whatever eglantine may be—climbing round the windows; but love in a hovel—which is the plain prose of it in these hard times—can't be considered either pretty or poetical. Unless some Columbus of a critic, cruising through reams of minor verse, discovers my priceless worth some day, and divulges me to the world, there's no chance of my ever being

able to afford anything so good and sweet as Elsie.—But the other one's a nice small girl of her sort too. I think for my part I shall alter and amend those quaint little verses of Blackie's a bit—make 'em run :

> "I can like a hundred women ;
> I can love a score ;
> Only with a heart's devotion
> Worship three or four."

Relf laughed merrily in spite of himself.

Massinger went on musing in an undertone : "Not that I like the first and third lines as they stand, at all : a careful versifier would have insisted upon rhyming them. I should have made 'devotion' chime in with 'ocean,' or 'lotion,' or 'Goshen,' or 'emotion,' or something of that sort, to polish it up a bit. There's very good business to be got out of 'emotion,' if you work it properly; but 'ocean' comes in handy, too, down here at Whitestrand. I'll dress it up into a bit of verse this evening, I think, for Elsie—or the other girl. Winifred's her Christian name. Hard case, Winifred. 'Been afraid' is only worthy of Browning, who'd perpetrate anything in the way of a rhyme to save himself

trouble. Has a false Ingoldsby gallop of verse about it that I don't quite like. Winnie's comparatively easy, of course: you've got 'skinny' and 'finny,' and 'Minnie' and 'spinney.' But Winifred's a very hard case indeed. 'Winnie' and 'guinea' are good enough rhymes; but not quite new: they've been virtually done before by Rossetti, you know:

> "Lazy, laughing, languid Jenny,
> Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea."

But I doubt if I could ever consent to make love to a girl whose name's so utterly and atrociously unmanageable as plain Winifred. —Now, Mary—there's a name for you, if you like: with 'fairy' and 'airy, and 'chary' and 'vagary,' and all sorts of other jolly old-world rhymes to go with it. Or if you want to be rural, you can bring in 'dairy'—do the pretty-milkmaid business to perfection. But 'Winifred'—'bin afraid'—the thing's impossible. It compels you to murder the English language. I wouldn't demean myself —or I think it ought to be by rights bemean myself—by writing verses to her with such a name as that.—I shall send them to Elsie,

who, after all, deserves them more, and will be flattered with the attention into the bargain."

At ten o'clock, he came out once more from his own room to the little parlour, where Warren Relf was seated "cooking" a sky in one of his hasty seaside sketches. He had an envelope in his hand, and a hat on his head. "Where are you off?" Relf asked carelessly.

"Oh, just to the post," Hugh Massinger answered with a gay nod. "I've finished my new batch of verses on the ocean—emotion—potion—devotion theme, and I'm sending them off, all hot from the oven, to my cousin Elsie.—They're not bad in their way. I like them myself. I shall print them, I think, in next week's *Athenæum*."

CHAPTER VI.

WHICH LADY?

Hugh found the day among the sandhills simply delightful. He had said with truth he loved all innocent pleasures, for his was one of those sunny, many-sided, æsthetic natures, in spite of its underlying tinge of pessimism and sadness, that throw themselves with ardour into every simple country delight, and find deep enjoyment in trees and flowers and waves and scenery, in the scent of new-mown hay and the song of birds, and in social intercourse with beautiful women. Warren Relf had readily enough fallen in with Hugh's plan for their day's outing; for Warren Relf in his turn was human too, and at a first glance he had been greatly taken with Hugh's pretty cousin, the dark-eyed Girton girl. His possession of the *Mud-Turtle* gave him for the moment a title to

respect, for a yacht's a yacht, however tiny. So he took them all up together in the yawl to the foot of the sandhills; and while Mrs. Meysey and the girls were unpacking the hampers and getting lunch ready on the white slopes of the drifted dunes, he sat down by the shore and sketched a little bit of the river foreground that exactly suited his own peculiar style—an islet of mud, rising low from the bed of the sluggish stream, crowned with purple sea-aster and white-flowered scurvy-grass, and backed by a slimy bed of tidal ooze, that shone with glancing rays of gold and crimson in the broad flood of the reflected sunlight.

Elsie was very happy, too, in her way; for had she not Hugh all the time by her side, and was she not wearing the ardent verses she had received from him by post that very morning, inside her dress, pressed close against her heart, and rising and falling with every pulse and flutter of her bosom? To him, the handicraftsman, they were a mere matter of ocean, and potion, and lotion, and devotion, strung together on a slender thread of pretty conceit; but to her, in the innocent

ecstasy of a first great love, they meant more than words could possibly utter.

She could not thank him for them; her pride and delight went too deep for that; and even were it otherwise, she had no opportunity. But once, while they stood together by the sounding sea, with Winifred by their side, looking critically at the picture Warren Relf had sketched in hasty outline, and begun to colour, she found an occasion to let the poet know, by a graceful allusion, she had received his little tribute of verse in safety. As the painter with a few dainty strokes filled in the floating iridescent tints upon the sunlit ooze, she murmured aloud, as if quoting from some well-known poem:

> "Red strands that faintly fleck and spot
> The tawny flood thy banks enfold;
> A woof of Tyrian purple, shot
> Through cloth of gold."

Hugh looked up at her appreciatively with a smile of recognition. They were his own verses, out of the Song of the Char he had written and posted to her the night before. "Mere faint Swinburnian echoes, nothing worth," he murmured low in a deprecating

aside; but he was none the less flattered at the delicate attention, for all that. "And how clever of her, too," he thought to himself with a faint thrill, "to have pieced them in so deftly with the subject of the picture! After all, she's a very intelligent girl, Elsie! A man might go further and fare worse—if it were not for that negative quantity in doits and stivers."

Warren Relf looked up also with a quick glance at the dark-eyed girl. "You're right, Miss Challoner," he said, stealing a lover's side-look at the iridescent peacock hues upon the gleaming mud. "It shines like opal. No precious stone on earth could be lovelier than that. Few people have the eye to see beauty in a flat of tidal mud like the one I'm painting; but cloth of gold and Tyrian purple are the only words one could possibly find to express in fit language the glow and glory of its exquisite colouring. If only I could put it on canvas now, as you've put it in words, even the Hanging Committee of the Academy, I believe—hard-hearted monsters—would scarcely be stony enough to dream of rejecting it."

Elsie smiled. How every man reads things his own way, by the light of his own personal interests! Hugh had seen she was trying to thank him unobtrusively for his copy of verses; Warren Relf had only found in her apt quotation a passing criticism on his own little water-colour.

After lunch, the two seniors, the Squire and Mrs. Meysey, manifested the distinct desire of middle age for a quiet digestion in the shade of the sandhills; and the four younger folks, nothing loth to be free, wandered off in pairs at their own sweet will along the bank of the river. Hugh took Elsie for his companion at first, while Warren Relf had to put himself off for the time being with the blue-eyed Winifred. Now Relf hated blue eyes. "But we must arrange it like a set of Lancers," Hugh cried with an easy flourish of his graceful hand; "at the end of the figure, set to corners and change partners." Elsie might have felt half jealous for a moment at this equitable suggestion, if Hugh hadn't added to her in a lower tone, and with his sweetest smile: "I mustn't monopolize you all the afternoon, you know,

Elsie; Relf must have his innings too; I can see by his face he's just dying to talk to you."

"I'd rather a great deal talk with you, Hugh," Elsie murmured gently, looking down at the sands with an apparently sudden geological interest in their minute composition.

"I'm proud to hear it; so would I," Hugh answered gallantly. "But we mustn't be selfish. I hate selfishness. I'll sacrifice myself by-and-by on the altar of fraternity to give Relf a turn in due season. Meanwhile, Elsie, let's be happy together while we can. Moments like these don't come to one often in the course of a lifetime. They're as rare as rubies and as all good things. When they do come, I prize them far too much to think of wasting them in petty altercation."

They strolled about among the undulating dunes for an hour or more, talking in that vague emotional way that young men and maidens naturally fall into when they walk together by the shore of the great deep, and each very much pleased with the other's society, as usually happens under similar circumstances. The dunes were indeed a lovely place for flirting in, as if made for the purpose

—high billowy hillocks of blown sand, all white and firm, and rolling like chalk downs, but matted together underfoot with a tussocky network of spurges and campions and soldanella convolvulus. In the tiny combes and valleys in between, where tall reed-like grasses made a sort of petty imitation jungle, you could sit down unobserved under the lee of some mimic range of mountains, and take your ease in an enchanted garden, like sultans and sultanas of the "Arabian Nights," without risk of intrusion. The sea tumbled in gently on one side upon the long white beach; the river ran on the other just within the belt of blown sandhills; and wedged between the two, in a long line, the barrier ridge of miniature wolds stretched away for miles and miles in long perspective towards the southern horizon. It was a lotus-eating place to lie and dream and make love in for ever. As Hugh sat there idly with Elsie by his side under the lee of the dunes, he wondered the Squire could ever have had the bad taste to object to the generous east wind which had overwhelmed his miserable utilitarian salt-marsh pastures with this

quaint little fairyland of tiny knolls and Lilliputian valleys. For his own part, Hugh was duly grateful to that unconscious atmospheric landscape gardener for his admirable additions to the flat Suffolk scenery; he wanted nothing better or sweeter in life than to lie here for ever stretched at his ease in the sun, and talk of poetry and love with Elsie.

At the end of an hour, however, he roused himself sturdily. Life, says the philosopher, is not all beer and skittles; nor is it all poetry and dalliance either. "Stern duty sways our lives against our will," say the "Echoes from Callimachus." It's all very well, at odd moments, to sport with Amaryllis in the shade, or with the tangles of Neæra's hair—for a reasonable period. But if Amaryllis has no money of her own, or if Neæra is a penniless governess in a country-house, the wise man must sacrifice sentiment at last to solid advantages; he must quit Amaryllis in search of Phyllis, or reject Neæra in favour of Vera, that opulent virgin, who has lands and houses, messuages and tenements, stocks and shares, and is a ward in Chancery. Face

to face with such a sad necessity, Hugh now found himself. He was really grieved that the circumstances of the case compelled him to tear himself unwillingly away from Elsie; he was so thoroughly enjoying himself in his own pet way; but duty, duty—duty before everything! The slave of duty jumped up with a start.

"My dear child," he exclaimed, glancing hastily at his watch, "Relf will really never forgive me. I'm sure it's time for us to set to corners and change partners. Not, of course, that I want to do it myself. For two people who are *not* engaged, I think we've had a very snug little time of it here together, Elsie. But a bargain's a bargain, and Relf must be inwardly grinding his teeth at me. —Let's go and meet them."

Elsie rose more slowly and wistfully. "I'm never so happy anywhere, Hugh," she said with a lingering cadence, "as when you're with me."

"And yet we are *not* engaged," Hugh went on in a meditative murmur—"we're not engaged. We're only cousins! For mere cousins, our cousinly solicitude for one

another's welfare is truly touching. If all families were only as united as ours, now! interpreters of prophecy would not have far to seek for the date of the millennium. Well, well, instructress of youth, we must look out for these other young people; and if I were you, experience would suggest to me the desirability of not coming upon them from behind too unexpectedly or abruptly. A fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind. Relf is young, and the pretty pupil is by no means unattractive."

"I'd trust Winifred as implicitly——" Elsie began, and broke off suddenly.

"As you'd trust yourself," Hugh put in, with a little quiet irony, completing her sentence. "No doubt, no doubt; I can readily believe it. But even you and I—who are staider and older, and merely cousins—wouldn't have cared to be disturbed too abruptly just now, you know, when we were pulling soldanellas to pieces in concert in the hollow down yonder. I shall climb to the top of the big sandhill there, and from that specular mount—as Satan remarks in 'Paradise Regained'—I shall spy from afar where

Relf has wandered off to with the immaculate Winifred.—Ah, there they are, over yonder by the beach, looking for pebbles or something—I suppose amber. Let's go over to them, Elsie, and change partners. Common politeness compels one, of course, to pay some attention to one's host's daughter."

As they strolled away again with a change of partners, back towards the spot where Mrs. Meysey was somewhat anxiously awaiting them, Hugh and Winifred turned their talk casually on Elsie's manifold charms and excellences. "She's a sweet, isn't she?" Winifred cried to her new acquaintance in enthusiastic appreciation. "Did you ever in your life meet anybody like her?"

"No, never," Hugh answered with candid praise. Candour was always Hugh's special cue. "She's a dear, good girl, and I like her immensely. I'm proud of her too. The only inheritance I ever received from my family is my cousinship to Elsie; and I duly prize it as my sole heirloom from fifty generations of penniless Massingers."

"Then you're very fond of her, Mr. Massinger?"

"Yes, very fond of her. When a man's only got one relative in the world, he naturally values that unique possession far more than those who have a couple of dozen or so of all sexes and ages, assorted. Some people suffer from too much family; my misfortune is that, being a naturally affectionate man, I suffer from too little. It's the old case of the one ewe lamb; Elsie is to me my brothers and my sisters, and my cousins and my aunts, all rolled into one, like the supers at the theatre."

"And are you and she——" Winifred began timidly. All girls are naturally inquisitive on that important question.

Hugh broke her off with a quick, little laugh. "Oh, dear no, nothing of the sort," he answered hastily, in his jaunty way. "We're not engaged, if that's what you mean, Miss Meysey; nor at all likely to be. Our affection, though profound, is of the brotherly and sisterly order only. It's much nicer so, of course. When people are engaged, they're always looking forward with yearning and longing and other unpleasant internal feelings, much enlarged upon in Miss Virginia Gabriel's songs, to a delusive future. When

they're simply friends, or brothers and sisters, they can enjoy their friendship or their fraternity in the present tense, without for ever gazing ahead with wistful eyes towards a distant and ever receding horizon."

"But why need it recede?" Winifred asked innocently.

"Why need it recede? Ah, there you pose me. Well, it needn't, of course, among the rich and the mighty. If people are swells, and amply provided for by their godfathers and godmothers at their baptism, or otherwise, they can marry at once; but the poor and the struggling—that's Elsie and me, you know, Miss Meysey—the poor and the struggling get engaged foolishly, and hope and hope for a humble cottage—the poetical cottage, all draped with roses and wild honeysuckle, and the well-attired woodbine—and toil and moil and labour exceedingly, and find the cottage receding, receding, receding still, away off in the distance, while they plough their way through the hopeless years, just as the horizon recedes for ever before you when you steer straight out for it in a boat at sea. The moral is—poor folk should

not indulge in the luxury of hearts, and should wrap themselves up severely in their own interests, till they're wholly and utterly and irretrievably selfish."

"And are you selfish, I wonder, Mr. Massinger?"

"I try to be, of course, from a sense of duty; though I'm afraid I make a very poor hand at it. I was born with a heart, and do what I will, I can't quite stifle that irrepressible natural organ.—But I take it all out, I believe, in the end, in writing verses."

"You sent Elsie some verses this morning," Winifred broke out in an artless way, as if she were merely stating a common fact of every-day experience.

Hugh had some difficulty in suppressing a start, and in recovering his composure so as to answer unconcernedly: "Oh, she showed them to you, then, did she?" (How thoughtless of him to have posted those poor rhymes to Elsie, when he might have known beforehand she would confide them at once to Miss Meysey's sympathetic ear!)

"No, she didn't show them to me," Winifred replied, in the same careless easy

way as before. "I saw them drop out of the envelope, that's all; and Elsie put them away as soon as she saw they were verses; but I was sure they were yours, because I know your handwriting—Elsie's shown me bits of your letters sometimes."

"I often send copies of my little pieces to Elsie before I print them," Hugh went on casually, in his most candid manner. "It may be vain of me, but I like her to see them. She's a capital critic, Elsie; women often are: she sometimes suggests to me most valuable alterations and modifications in some of my verses."

"Tell me these ones," Winifred asked abruptly, with a little blush.

It was a trying moment. What was Hugh to do? The verses he had actually sent to Elsie were all emotion and devotion, and hearts and darts, and fairest and thou wearest, and charms and arms; amorous and clamorous chimed together like old friends in one stanza, and sorrow dispelled itself to-morrow with its usual cheerful punctuality in the next. To recite them to Winifred as they stood would be to retire at once from his half-projected

siege of the pretty little heiress's heart and hand. For that decisive step Hugh was not at present entirely prepared. He mustn't allow himself to be beaten by such a scholar's mate as this. He cleared his throat, and began boldly on another piece, ringing out his lines with a sonorous lilt—a set of silly, garrulous, childish verses he had written long since, but never published, about some merry sea-elves in an enchanted submarine fairy country.

"A tiny fay
At the bottom lay
Of a purple bay
Unruffled,
On whose crystal floor
The distant roar
From the surf-bound shore
Was muffled.

"With his fairy wife
He passed his life,
Undimmed by strife
Or quarrel;
And the livelong day
They would merrily play,
Through a labyrinth gay,
With coral.

"They loved to dwell
In a pearly shell,
And to deck their cell
With amber;

Or amid the caves,
That the riplet laves
And the beryl paves,
To clamber."

He went on so, with his jigging versicles, line after line, as they walked along the firm white sand together, through several foolish sing-song stanzas; till at last, when he was more than half way through the meaningless little piece, a sudden thought pulled him up abruptly. He had chosen, as he thought, the most innocent and non-committing bit of utter trash in all his private poetical repertory; but now, as he repeated it over to Winifred with easy intonaton, swinging his stick to keep time as he went, he recollected all at once that the last rhymes flew off at a tangent to a very personal conclusion—and what was worse, were addressed, too, not to Elsie, but very obviously to another lady! The end was somewhat after this wise:

"On a darting shrimp
Our quaint little imp
With bridle of gimp
Would gambol;
Or across the back
Of a sea-horse, black
As a gentleman's hack,
He'd amble.

"Of emerald green
And sapphire's sheen
He made his queen
A tiar;
And the merry two
Their whole life through
Were as happy as you
And I are."

And then came the seriously compromising bit:

"But if you say
You think this lay
Of the tiny fay
Too silly;
Let it have the praise
My eye betrays
To your own sweet gaze,
My Lily.

"For a man he tries,
And he toils and sighs
To be very wise
And witty;
But a dear little dame
Has enough of fame,
If she wins the name
Of pretty."

Lily! Lily! Oh, that discomposing, unfortunate, compromising Lily! He had met her down in Warwickshire two seasons since, at a country-house where they were both staying, and had fallen over head and ears in

love with her—then. Now, he only wished with all his heart and soul she and her fays were at the bottom of the sea in a body together. For of course she was penniless. If not, by this time she would no doubt have been Mrs. Massinger.

Hugh Massinger was a capital actor; but even he could hardly have ventured to pretend with a grave face that those Lily verses had ever been addressed to Elsie Challoner. Everything depended upon his presence of mind and a bold resolve. He hesitated for a moment at the "emerald green and sapphire's sheen," and seemed as though he couldn't recall the next line. After a minute or two's pretended searching he recovered it feebly, and then he stumbled again over the end of the stanza.

"It's no use," he cried at last, as if angry with himself. "I should only murder them if I were to go on now. I've forgotten the rest. The words escape me. And they're really not worth your seriously listening to."

"I like them," Winifred said in her simple way. "They're so easy to understand: so

melodious and meaningless. I love verse that you don't have to puzzle over. I can't bear Browning for that—he's so impossible to make anything sensible out of. But I adore silly little things like these, that go in of one ear and out of the other, and really sound as if they meant something. I shall ask Elsie to tell me the end of them."

Here was indeed a dilemma! Suppose she did, and suppose Elsie showed her the real verses! At all hazards, he must extricate himself somehow from this impossible situation.

"I wish you wouldn't," he said gently, in his softest and most persuasive voice. "Elsie mightn't like you to know I sent her my verses—though there's nothing in it—girls are so sensitive sometimes about these matters. —But I'll tell you what I'll do, if you'll kindly allow me; I'll write you out the end of them when I get home to the inn, and bring them written out in full, a nice clear copy, the next time I have the pleasure of seeing you." ("I can alter the end somehow," he thought to himself with a sudden inspiration, "and dress them up innocently one way or another with

fresh rhymes, so as to have no special applicability of any sort to anybody or anything anywhere in particular.")

"Thank you," Winifred replied, with evident pleasure. "I should like that ever so much better. It'll be so nice to have a poet's verses written out for one's self in his own handwriting."

"You do me too much honour," Hugh answered with his mock little bow. "I don't pretend to be a poet at all; I'm only a versifier."

They joined the old folks in time by the yawl. The Squire was getting anxious to go back to his garden now—he foresaw rain in the sky to westward.

Hugh glanced hastily at his watch with a sigh. "I must be going back too," he cried. "It's nearly five now; we can't be up at the village till six. Post goes out at nine, they say, and I have a book to review before post-time. It must positively reach town not later than to-morrow morning. And what's worse, I haven't yet so much as begun to dip into it."

"But you can never read it, and review

it too, in three hours!" Winifred exclaimed, aghast.

"Precisely so," Hugh answered, in his jaunty way, with a stifled yawn; "and therefore I propose to omit the reading as a very unnecessary and wasteful preliminary. It often prejudices one against a book to know what's in it. You approach a work you haven't read with a mind unbiased by preconceived impressions. Besides, this is only a three-volume novel; they're all alike; it doesn't matter. You can say the plot is crude and ill-constructed, the dialogue feeble, the descriptions vile, the situations borrowed, and the characters all mere conventional puppets. The same review will do equally well for the whole stupid lot of them. I usually follow Sydney Smith's method in that matter; I cut a few pages at random, here and there, and then smell the paper-knife."

"But is that just?" Elsie asked quietly, a slight shade coming over her earnest face.

"My dear Miss Challoner," Warren Relf put in hastily, "have you known Massinger so many years without finding out that he's always a great deal better than he himself pre-

tends to be? I know him well enough to feel quite confident he'll read every word of that novel through to-night, if he sits up till four o'clock in the morning to do it; and he'll let the London people have their review in time, if he telegraphs up every blessed word of it by special wire to-morrow morning. His wickedness is always only his brag; his goodness he hides carefully under his own extremely capacious bushel."

Hugh laughed. "As you know me so much better than I know myself, my dear boy," he replied easily, "there's nothing more to be said about it. I'm glad to receive so good a character from a connoisseur in human nature. I really never knew before want an amiable and estimable member of society hid himself under my rugged and unprepossessing exterior." And as he said it, he drew himself up, and darting a laugh from the corner of those sad black eyes, looked at the moment the handsomest and most utterly killing man in the county of Suffolk.

When Elsie and Winifred went up to their own rooms that evening, the younger girl, slipping into Elsie's bedroom for a moment,

took her friend's hands tenderly in her own, and looking long and eagerly into the other's eyes, said at last in a quick tone of unexpected discovery: "Elsie, he's awfully nice-looking and awfully clever, this Oxford cousin of yours. I like him immensely."

Elsie brought back her eyes from infinity with a sudden start. "I'm glad you do, dear," she said, looking down at her kindly. "I wanted you to like him. I should have been dreadfully disappointed, in fact, if you didn't. I'm exceedingly fond of Hugh, Winnie."

Winifred paused for a second significantly; then she asked point-blank, "Elsie, are you engaged to him?"

"Engaged to him! My darling, what ever made you dream of such a thing?—Engaged to Hugh!—engaged to Hugh Massinger! —Why, Winnie, you know, he's my own cousin."

"But you don't answer my question plainly," Winifred persisted with girlish determination. "Are you engaged to him or are you not?"

Elsie, mindful of Hugh's frequent declara-

tions, answered boldly (and not quite untruthfully), "No, I'm not, Winifred."

The heiress of Whitestrand stroked her friend's hair with a sigh of relief. That sigh was blind. Girl though she was, she might clearly have seen with a woman's instinct that Elsie's flushed cheek and downcast eyes belied to the utmost her spoken word. But she did not see it. All preoccupied as she was with her own thoughts and her own wishes, she never observed at all those mute witnesses to Elsie's love for her handsome cousin. She was satisfied in her heart with Hugh's and Elsie's double verbal denial. She said to herself with a thrill in her own soul, as a girl will do in the first full flush of her earliest passion, "Then I may love him if I like! I may make him love me! It won't be wrong to Elsie for me to love him!"

CHAPTER VII.

FRIENDS IN COUNCIL.

That same night, as the Squire and Mrs. Meysey sat by themselves towards the small-hours—after the girls had unanimously evacuated the drawing-room—discussing the affairs of the universe generally, as then and there envisaged, over a glass of claret-cup, the mother looked up at last with a sudden glance into the father's face, and said in a tone half-anxious, half-timid: "Tom, did it happen to strike you this afternoon that that handsome cousin of Elsie Challoner's seemed to take a great fancy to our Winifred?"

The Squire stirred his claret-cup idly with his spoon. "I suppose the fellow has eyes in his head," he answered bluntly. "No man in his senses could ever look at our little Winnie, I should think, Emily, and not fall over his ears in love with her."

Mrs. Meysey waited a minute or two more in silent suspense before she spoke again; then she said once more, very tentatively, "He seems a tolerably nice young man, I think, Tom."

"Oh, he's well enough, I dare say," the Squire admitted grudgingly.

"A barrister, he says. That's a very good profession," Mrs. Meysey went on, still feeling her way by gradual stages.

"Never heard so in my life before," the Squire grunted out. "There are barristers and barristers. He gets no briefs. Lives on literature, by what he tells me: next door to living upon your wits, I call it."

"But I mean, it's a gentleman's profession, anyhow, Tom, the bar."

"Oh, the man's a gentleman, of course, if it comes to that—a perfect gentleman; and an Oxford man, and a person of culture, and all that sort of thing—I don't deny it. He's a very presentable fellow, too, in his own way; and most intelligent: understands the riparian proprietors' question as easy as anything.—You can ask him to dinner whenever you choose, if that's what you're driving at."

Mrs. Meysey called another halt for a few seconds before she reopened fire, still more timidly than ever. "Tom, do you know I rather fancy he really likes our Winifred?" she murmured, gasping.

"Of course he likes our Winifred," the Squire repeated, with profound conviction in every tone of his voice. "I should like to know who on earth there is that doesn't like our Winifred! Nothing new in that. I could have told you so myself. Go ahead with it, then.—What next, now, Emily?"

"Well, I think, Tom, if I'm not mistaken, Winifred seemed rather inclined to take a fancy to him too, somehow."

Thomas Wyville Meysey laid down his glass incredulously on the small side-table. He didn't explode, but he hung fire for a moment. "You women are always fancying things," he said at last, with a slight frown. "You think you're so precious quick, you do, at reading other people's faces. I don't deny you often succeed in reading them right. You read mine precious often, I know, when I don't want you to—that I can swear to. But sometimes, Emily, you know you read what

isn't in them. That's the way with all decipherers of hieroglyphics. They see a great deal more in things than ever was put there. You remember that time when I met old Hillier down by the copse yonder——"

"Yes, yes, I remember," Mrs. Meysey admitted, checking him at the outset with an astute concession. She had cause to remember the facts, indeed, for the Squire reminded her of that one obvious and palpable mistake about the young fox-cubs at least three times a week, the year round, on an average. "I was wrong that time; I know I was, of course. You weren't in the least annoyed with Mr. Hillier. But I think—I don't say I'm sure, observe, dear—but I think Winifred's likely to take a fancy in time to this young Mr. Massinger. Now, the question is, if she does take a fancy to him—a serious fancy—and he to her—what are you and I to do about it?"

As she spoke, Mrs. Meysey looked hard at the lamp, and then at her husband, wondering with what sort of grace he would receive this very revolutionary and upsetting suggestion. For herself—though mothers are hard to please—it may as well be admitted off-hand,

she had fallen a ready victim at once to Hugh Massinger's charms and brilliancy and blandishments. Such a nice young man, so handsome and gentlemanly, so adroit in his talk, so admirable in his principles, and though far from rich, yet, in his way, distinguished! A better young man, darling Winifred was hardly likely to meet with. But what would dear Tom think about him? she wondered. Dear Tom had such very expansive not to say utopian ideas for Winifred—thought nobody but a Duke or a Prince of the blood half good enough for her: though, to be sure, experience would seem to suggest that Dukes and Princes, after all, are only human, and not originally very much better than other people. Whatever superior moral excellence we usually detect in the finished product may no doubt be safely set down in ultimate analysis to the exceptional pains bestowed by society upon their ethical education.

The Squire looked into his claret-cup profoundly for a few seconds before answering, as if he expected to find it a perfect Dr. Dee's divining crystal, big with hints as to his

daughter's future; and then he burst out abruptly with a grunt: "I suppose we must leave the answering of that question entirely to Winnie."

Mrs. Meysey did not dare to let her internal sigh of relief escape her throat; that would have been too compromising, and would have alarmed dear Tom. So she stifled it quietly. Then dear Tom was not wholly averse, after all, to this young Mr. Massinger. *He*, too, had fallen a victim to the poet's wiles. That was well; for Mrs. Meysey, with a mother's eye, had read Winifred's heart through and through. But we must not seem to give in too soon. A show of resistance runs in the grain with women. "He's got no money," she murmured suggestively.

The Squire flared up. "Money!" he cried, with infinite contempt, "money! money! Who the dickens says anything to me about money? I believe that's all on earth you women think about.—Money indeed! Much I care about money, Emily. I dare say the young fellow hasn't got money. What then? Who cares for that? He's got money's worth. He's got brains; he's got principles; he's got

the will to work and to get on. He'll be a judge in time, I don't doubt. If a man like that were to marry our Winifred, with the aid we could give him and the friends we could find him, he ought to rise by quick stages to be — anything you like — Lord Chancellor, or Postmaster-general, or Archbishop of Canterbury, for the matter of that, if your tastes happen to run in that direction."

"He hasn't done much at the bar yet," Mrs. Meysey continued, playing her fish dexterously before landing it.

"Hasn't done much! Of course he hasn't done much! How the dickens could he? Can a man make briefs for himself, do you suppose? He's given himself up, he tells me, to earning a livelihood by writing for the papers. Penny-a-lining; writing for the papers. He had to do it. It's a pity, upon my word, a clever young fellow like that—he understands the riparian proprietors' question down to the very ground—should be compelled to turn aside from his proper work at the bar to serve tables, so to speak—to gain his daily bread by penny-a-lining. If Winifred were to take a fancy to a young man

like that, now——" The Squire paused, and eyed the light through his glass reflectively.

"He's very presentable," Mrs. Meysey went on, re-arranging her workbox, and still angling cleverly for dear Tom's indignation.

"He's a man any woman might be perfectly proud of," the Squire retorted in a thunderous voice with firm conviction.

Mrs. Meysey followed up her advantage persistently for twenty minutes, insinuating every possible hint against Hugh, and leading the Squire deeper and deeper into a hopeless slough of unqualified commendation. At the end of that time she said quietly, "Then I understand, Tom, that if Winifred and this young Massinger take a fancy to one another, you don't put an absolute veto on the idea of their getting engaged, do you?"

"I only want Winnie to choose for herself," the Squire answered with prompt decision. "Not that I suppose for a moment there's anything in this young fellow's talking a bit to her. Men *will* flirt, and girls *will* let 'em. Getting engaged indeed! You count your chickens before the eggs are laid. A

man can't look at a girl nowadays, but you women must take it into your precious heads at once he wants to go straight off to church and marry her. However, for my part, I'm not going to interfere in the matter one way or the other. I'd rather she'd marry the man she loves, and the man who loves her, whenever he turns up, than marry fifty thousand pounds and the best estate in all Suffolk."

Mrs. Meysey had carried her point with honours. "Perhaps you're right, dear," she said diplomatically, as who should yield to superior wisdom. It was her policy not to appear too eager.

"Perhaps I'm right!" the Squire echoed, half in complacency and half in anger. "Of course I'm right. I know I'm right, Emily. Why, I was reading in a book the other day a most splendid appeal from some philosophic writer or other about making fewer marriages in future to please Mamma, and more to suit the tastes of the parties concerned, and subserve the good of coming generations. I think it was an article in one of the magazines. It's the right way, I'm sure of that; and in Winifred's case I mean to stick to it."

So, from that day forth, if it was Hugh Massinger's intention or desire to prosecute his projected military operations against Winifred Meysey's hand and heart, he found at least a benevolent neutral in the old Squire, and a secret, silent, but none the less powerful domestic ally in Mrs. Meysey. It is not often that a penniless suitor thus enlists the sympathies of the parental authorities, who ought by precedent to form the central portion of the defensive forces, on his own side in such an aggressive enterprise. But with Hugh Massinger, nobody ever even noticed it as a singular exception. He was so clever, so handsome, so full of promise, so courteous and courtly in his demeanour to young and old, so rich in future hopes and ambitions, that not the Squire alone, but everybody else who came in contact with his easy smile, accepted him beforehand as almost already a Lord Chancellor, or a Poet Laureate, or an Archbishop of Canterbury, according as he might choose to direct his talents into this channel or that; and failed to be surprised that the Meyseys or anybody else on earth should accept him with effusion as a favoured

postulant for the hand of their only daughter and heiress. There are a few such universal favourites here and there in the world: whenever you meet one, smile with the rest, but remember that his recipe is a simple one —Humbug.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ROADS DIVIDE.

Hugh stopped for two months or more at Whitestrand, and during all that time he saw much both of Elsie and of Winifred. The Meyseys introduced him with cordial pleasure to all the melancholy gaieties of the sleepy little peninsula. He duly attended with them the somnolent garden-parties on the smooth lawns of neighbouring Squires: the monotonous picnics up the tidal stream of the meandering Char; the heavy dinners at every local rector's and vicar's and resident baronet's; with all the other dead-alive entertainments of the dullest and most stick-in-the-mud corner of all England. The London poet enlivened them all, however, with his never-failing flow of exotic humour, and his slow, drawled-out readiness of Pall-Mall

repartee. It was a comfort to him, indeed, to get among these unspoiled and unsophisticated children of nature; he could palm off upon them as original the last good thing of that fellow Hatherley's from the smoking-room of the Cheyne Row Club, or fire back upon them, undetected, dim reminiscences of pungent chaff overheard in brilliant West-end drawing-rooms. And then, there were Elsie and Winifred to amuse him; and Hugh, luxurious, easy-going epicurean philosopher that he was, took no trouble to decide in his own mind even what might be his ultimate intentions towards either fair lady, satisfied only, as he phrased it to his inner self, to take the goods the gods provided him for the passing moment, and to keep them both well in hand together. "How happy could I be with either," sings Captain Macheath in the oft-quoted couplet, "were t'other dear charmer away." Hugh took a still more lenient view of his personal responsibilities than the happy-go-lucky knight of the highway: he was quite content to be blest, while he could, with both at once, asking no questions, for conscience' sake, of his own

final disposition, marital or otherwise, towards one or the other, but leaving the problem of his matrimonial arrangements for fate, or chance, to settle in its own good fashion.

It was just a week after his arrival at Whitestrand that he went up one morning early to the Hall. Elsie and Winifred were seated together on a rug under the big tree, engaged in reading one novel between them.

"You must wish Winifred many happy returns of the day," Elsie called out gaily, looking up from her book as Hugh approached them. "It's her birthday, Hugh; and just see what a lovely delightful present Mr. Meysey's given her!"

Winifred held out the present at arm's length for his admiration. It was a pretty little watch, in gold and enamel, with her initials engraved on the back on a broad shield. "It's just a beauty! I should love one like it myself!" Elsie cried enthusiastically. "Did you ever see such a dear little thing? It's keyless too, and so exquisitely finished. It really makes me feel quite ashamed of my own poor old battered silver one."

Hugh took the watch and examined it

carefully. He noted the maker's name upon the dial, and opening the back, made a rapid mental memorandum of the number. A sudden thought had flashed across him at the moment. He waited only a few minutes at the Hall, and then asked the two girls if they could walk down into the village with him. He had a telegram to send off, he said, which he had only just that moment remembered. Would they mind stepping over with him as far as the post-office?

They strolled together into the sleepy High Street. At the office, Hugh wrote and sent off his telegram. It was addressed to a well-known firm of watchmakers in Ludgate Hill. "Could you send me by to-morrow evening's post, to address as below, a lady's gold and enamel watch with initials "E. C., from H. M." engraved on shield on back, but in every other respect precisely similar to No. 2479 just supplied to Mr. Meysey, of Whitestrand Hall? If so, telegraph back cash-price at once, and cheque for amount shall be sent immediately. Reply paid.—Hugh Massinger, Fisherman's Rest, Whitestrand, Suffolk."

Before lunch-time, the reply had duly arrived: "Watch shall be sent on receipt of cheque. Price twenty-five guineas." So far, good. It was a fair amount for a journeyman journalist to pay for a present; but, as Hugh shrewdly reflected, it would kill two birds with one stone. Day after to-morrow was Elsie's birthday. The watch would give Elsie pleasure; and Hugh, to do him justice, thoroughly loved giving pleasure to anybody, especially a pretty girl, and above all Elsie. But it could also do him no harm in the Meyseys' eyes to see that, journeyman journalist as he was, he was earning enough to afford to throw away twenty-five guineas on a mere present to a governess-cousin. There is a time for economy, and there is a time for lavishness. The present moment clearly came under the latter category.

On the second morning, true to promise, the watch arrived by the early post; and Hugh took it up with pride to the Hall, to bestow it in a casual way upon poor breathless and affectionate Elsie. He took it up for a set purpose. He would show these purse-

proud landed aristocrats that his cousin could sport as good a watch any day as their own daughter. The Massingers themselves had been landed aristocrats—not presumably purse-proud—in their own day in dear old Devonshire; but the estates had disappeared in houses and port and riotous living two generations since; and Hugh was now proving in his own person the truth of the naif old English adage—"When land is gone and money spent, then larning is most excellent." Journalism is a poor sort of trade in its way, but at any rate an able man can earn his bread and salt at it somehow. Hugh didn't grudge those twenty-five guineas: he regarded them, as he regarded his poems, in the light of a valuable long investment. They were a sort of indirect double bid for the senior Meyseys' respect and for Winifred's fervent admiration. When a man is paying attentions to a pretty girl, there's nothing on earth he desires so much as to appear in her eyes lavishly generous. A less abstruse philosopher, however, might perhaps have bestowed his generosity direct upon Winifred *in propriâ personâ:* Hugh,

with his subtler calculation of long odds and remote chances, deemed it wiser to display it in the first instance obliquely upon Elsie. This was an acute little piece of psychological byplay. A man who can make a present like that to a poor cousin, with whom he stands upon a purely cousinly footing, must be, after all, not only generous, but a ripping good fellow into the bargain. How would he not comport himself under similar circumstances to the maiden of his choice, and to the wife of his bosom?

Elsie took the watch, when Hugh produced it, with a little cry of delight and surprise; then, looking at the initials so hastily engraved in neat Lombardic letters on the back, the tears rose to her eyes irrepressibly as she said with a gentle pressure of his hand in hers, "I know now, Hugh, what that telegram was about the other morning. How very, very kind and good of you to think of it.—But I almost wish you hadn't given it to me. I shall never forgive myself for having said before you I should like one the same sort as Winifred's. I'm quite ashamed of your having thought I meant to hint at it."

"Not at all," Hugh answered, with just the faintest possible return of her gentle pressure. "I was twisting it over in my own mind what on earth I could ever find to give you. I thought first of a copy of my last little volume; but then that's nothing—I'm only too sensible myself of its small worth. A book from an author is like spoiled peaches from a market-gardener: he gives them away only when he has a glut of them. So, when you said you'd like a watch of the same sort as Miss Meysey's, it seemed to me a perfect interposition of chance on my behalf. I knew what to get, and I got it at once. I'm only glad those London watch-maker fellows, whose respected name I've quite forgotten, had time to engrave your initials on it."

"But, Hugh, it must have cost you such a mint of money."

Hugh waved a deprecatory hand with airy magnificence over the broad shrubbery. "A mere trifle," he said, as who could command thousands. "It came just to the exact sum the *Contemporary* paid me for that last article of mine on 'The Future of Marriage.'"

(Which was quite true, the article in question having run to precisely twenty-five pages, at the usual honorarium of a guinea a page.) "It took me a few hours, only, to dash it off." (Which was scarcely so accurate, it not being usual for even the most abandoned or practised of journalists to "dash off" articles for a leading review; and the mere physical task of writing twenty-five pages of solid letter-press being considerably greater than most men, however rapid their pens, could venture to undertake in a few hours.)

Winifred looked up at him with a timid glance. "It's a lovely watch," she said, taking it over with an admiring look from Elsie: "and the inscription makes it ever so much nicer. One would prize it, of course, for that alone. But if I'd been Elsie, I'd a thousand times rather have had a volume of poems, with the author's autograph dedication, than all the watches in all England."

"Would you?" Hugh answered with an amused smile. "You rate the autographs of a living versifier immensely above their market value. Even Tennyson's may be bought at a shop in the Strand, you know,

for a few shillings. I feel this is indeed fame. I shall begin to grow conceited soon at this rate.—And by the way, Elsie, I've brought you a little bit of verse too. Your Laureate has not forgotten or neglected his customary duty. I shall expect a butt of sack in return for these: or may I venture to take it out instead in nectar?" They stood all three behind a group of syringa bushes. He touched her lips with his own lightly as he spoke. "Many happy returns of the day —as a cousin," he added, laughing.—"And now, what's your programme for the day, Elsie?"

"We want you to row us up the river to Snade, if it's not too hot, Hugh," his pretty cousin responded, all blushes.

"Tuus, O Regina, quid optes, Explorare labor; mihi jussa capessere fas est," Hugh quoted merrily. "That's the best of talking to a Girton girl, you see. You can fire off your most epigrammatic Latin quotation at her, as it rises to your lips, and she understands it. How delightful that is, now. As a rule, my Latin quotations, which are frequent and free, as Truthful James says,

besides being neat and appropriate, like after-dinner speeches, fall quite flat upon the stony ground of the feminine intelligence—which last remark, I flatter myself, in the matter of mixed metaphor, would do credit to Sir Boyle Roche in his wildest flights of Hibernian eloquence. I made a lovely Latin pun at a picnic once. We had some chicken and ham sausage—a great red German sausage of the polony order, in a sort of huge boiled-lobster-coloured skin; and towards the end of lunch, somebody asked me for another slice of it. 'There isn't any,' said I. 'It's all gone. Finis Poloniæ!' Nobody laughed. They didn't know that 'Finis Poloniæ' were the last words uttered by a distinguished patriot and soldier, 'when Freedom shrieked as Kosciusko fell.' That comes of firing off your remarks, you see, quite above the head of your respected audience."

"But what does that mean that you just said this minute to Elsie?" Winifred asked doubtfully.

"What! A lady in these latter days who doesn't talk Latin!" Hugh cried, with pretended rapture. "This is too delicious! I

hardly expected such good fortune. I shall have the well-known joy, then, of explaining my own feeble little joke, after all, and grimly translating my own poor quotation. It means, 'Thy task it is, O Queen, to state thy will: Mine, thy behests to serve, for good or ill.' Rough translation, not necessarily intended for publication, but given merely as a guarantee of good faith, as the newspapers put it. Æolus makes the original remark to Juno in the first 'Æneid,' when he's just about to raise the wind—literally, not figuratively—on her behalf, against the unfortunate Trojans. He was then occupying the same post, as clerk of the weather, that is now filled jointly by the correspondent of the *New York Herald* and Mr. Robert Scott of the Meteorological Office. I hope they'll send us no squalls to-day, if you and Mrs. Meysey are going to come with us up the river."

On their way to the boat, Hugh stopped a moment at the inn to write hastily another telegram. It was to his London publisher: "Please kindly send a copy of 'Echoes from Callimachus' by first post to my address as under." And in five minutes more, the

telegram despatched, they were all rowing up stream in a merry party toward Snade meadows. Hugh's plan of campaign was now finally decided. He had nothing to do but to carry out in detail his siege operations.

In the meadows, he had ten minutes or so alone with Winifred. "Why, Mr. Massinger," she said with a surprised look, "was it you, then, who wrote that lovely article, in the *Contemporary*, on 'The Future of Marriage,' we've all been reading?"

"I'm glad you liked it," Hugh answered with evident pleasure; "and I suppose it's no use now trying any longer to conceal the fact that I was indeed the culprit."

"But there's another name to it," Winifred murmured in reply. "And mamma thought it must be Mr. Stone, the novelist."

"Habitual criminals are often wrongly suspected," Hugh answered with a languid laugh. "I didn't put my own name to it, however, because I was afraid it was a trifle sentimental, and I hate sentiment. Indeed, to say the truth—it was a cruel trick, perhaps, but I imitated many of Stone's little mannerisms, because I wanted people to

think it was really Stone himself who wrote it. But for all that, I believe it all—every word of it, I assure you, Miss Meysey."

"It was a lovely article," Winifred cried, enthusiastically. "Papa read it, and was quite enchanted with it. He said it was so sensible—just what he's always thought about marriage himself, though he never could get anybody else to agree with him. And I liked it too, if you won't think it dreadfully presumptuous of a girl to say so. I thought it took such a grand, beautiful, ethereal point of view, all up in the clouds, you know, with no horrid earthy materialism or nonsense of any sort to clog and spoil it. I think it was splendid, all that you said about its being treason to the race to take account of wealth or position, or prospects or connections, or any other worldly consideration, in choosing a husband or wife for one's self—and that one ought rather to be guided by instinct alone, because instinct—or love, as we call it—was the voice of nature speaking within us.—Papa said that was beautifully put. And I thought it was really true as well. I thought it was just what a great prophet

would have said if he were alive to say it; and that the man who wrote it——" She paused, breathless, partly because she was quite abashed by this time at her own temerity, and partly because Hugh Massinger, wicked man! was actually smiling a covert smile through the corners of his mouth at her youthful enthusiasm.

The pause sobered him. "Miss Meysey," he broke in, with unwonted earnestness, and with a certain strange tinge of subdued melancholy in his tremulous voice, "I didn't mean to laugh at you. I really believe it. I believe in my heart every single word of what I said there. I believe a man—or a woman either—ought to choose in marriage just the one other special person towards whom their own hearts inevitably lead them. I believe it all—I believe it without reserve. Money or rank, or connection or position, should be counted as nothing. We should go simply where nature leads us; and nature will never lead us astray. For nature is merely another name for the will of heaven made clear within us."

Ingenuous youth blushed itself crimson.

"I believe so too," the timid girl answered in a very low voice and with a heaving bosom.

He looked her through and through with his large dark eyes. She shrank and fluttered before his searching glance. Should he put out a velvet paw for his mouse now, or should he play with it artistically a little longer? Too much precipitancy spoils the fun. Better wait till the "Echoes from Callimachus" had arrived. They were very fetching. And then, besides—besides, he was not entirely without a conscience. A man should think neither of wealth nor position, nor prospects nor connections, in choosing himself a partner for life. His own heart led him straight towards Elsie, not towards Winifred. Could he turn his back upon it, with those words on his lips, and trample poor Elsie's tender heart under foot ruthlessly? Principle demanded it; but he had not the strength of mind to follow principle at that precise moment. He looked long and deep into Winifred's eyes. They were pretty blue eyes, though pale and mawkish by the side of Elsie's. Then he said with a sudden downcast, half-awkward

glance—that consummate actor—"I think we ought to go back to your mother now, Miss Meysey."

Winifred sighed. Not yet! Not yet! But he had looked at her hard! he had fluttered and trembled! He was summoning up courage. She felt sure of that. He didn't venture as yet to assault her openly. Still, she was certain he did really like her; just a little bit, if only a little.

Next morning, as she strolled alone on the lawn, a village boy in a corduroy suit came lounging up from the inn, in rustic *insouciance*, with a small parcel dangling by a string from his little finger. She knew the boy, and called him quickly towards her. "Dick," she cried, "what's that you've got there?"

The boy handed it to her with a mysterious nod. "It's for yow, miss," he said, in his native Suffolk, screwing up his face sideways into a most excruciating pantomimic expression of the profoundest secrecy. "The gentleman at our house—him wooth the black moostosh, ye know—he towd me to give it to yow, into yar own hands, he say, if I could manage to ketch ye aloon anyhow. He fared

partickler about yar own hands. I heen't got to wait, cos he say, there oon't be noo answer."

Winifred tore the packet open with trembling hands. It was a neat little volume, in a dainty delicate sage-green cover—"Echoes from Callimachus, and other Poems; by Hugh Massinger, sometime Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford." She turned at once with a flutter from the title-page to the fly-leaf: "À Mlle. Winifred Meysey; Hommage de l'auteur." She only waited a moment to slip a shilling into Dick's hand, and then rushed up, all crimson with delight, into her own bedroom. Twice she pressed the flimsy little sage-green volume in an ecstasy to her lips; then she laid it hastily in the bottom of a drawer, under a careless pile of handkerchiefs and lace bodices. She wouldn't tell even Elsie of that tardy much-prized birthday gift. No one but herself must ever know Hugh Massinger had sent her his volume of poems.

When Dick returned to the inn ten minutes later, environed in a pervading odour of peppermint, the indirect result of Winifred

Meysey's shilling, Hugh called him in lazily with his quiet authoritative air to the prim little parlour, and asked him in an undertone to whom he had given the precious parcel.

"To the young lady harself," Dick answered confidentially, thrusting the bull's-eye with his tongue into his pouched cheek. "I give it to har behind the laylacs, too, where noo one coon't see us."

"Dick," Hugh Massinger said, in a profoundly persuaded and sententious voice, laying his hand magisterially on the boy's shoulder, "you're a sharp lad; and if you develop your talents steadily in this direction, you may rise in time from the distinguished post of gentleman's gentleman to be a private detective or confidential agent, with an office of your own at the top of Regent Street. Dick, say nothing about this on any account to anybody; and there, my boy—there's half-a-crown for you."

"The young lady ha' gin me one shillen a'ready," Dick replied with alacrity, pocketing the coin with a broad grin. Business was brisk indeed this morning.

"The young lady was well advised,"

Hugh answered grimly. "They're cheap at the price—dirt cheap, I call it, those immortal poems—with an autograph inscription by the bard in person.—And I've done a good stroke of business myself too. The 'Echoes from Callimachus' are a capital landing-net. If they don't succeed in bringing her out, all flapping, on the turf, gaffed and done for, a pretty speckled prey, why, no angler on earth that ever fished for women will get so much as a tiny rise out of her.—It's a very fair estate still, is Whitestrand. 'Paris vaut bien une messe,' said Henri. I must make some little sacrifices myself if I want to conquer Whitestrand fair and even."

Paris vaut bien une messe, indeed. Was Whitestrand worth sacrificing Elsie Challoner's heart for?

CHAPTER IX.

HIGH-WATER.

MEANWHILE, Warren Relf navigating the pervasive and ubiquitous little *Mud-Turtle*, had spent his summer congenially in cruising in and out of Essex mud-flats and Norfolk broads, accompanied by his friend and chum Potts, the marine painter—now lying high and dry with the ebbing tide on some broad bare bank of ribbed sand, just relieved by a battle-royal of gulls and rooks from the last reproach of utter monotony; now working hard at the counterfeit presentment of a green-grown wreck, all picturesque with waving tresses of weed and sea-wrack, in some stranded estuary of the Thames back-waters; and now again tossing and lopping on the uneasy bosom of the German Ocean, whose rise and fall would seem to suggest to

a casual observer's mind the physiological notion that its own included crabs and lobsters had given it a prolonged and serious fit of marine indigestion. For a couple of months at a stretch the two young artists had toiled away ceaselessly at their labour of love, painting the sea itself and all that therein is, with the eyots, creeks, rivers, sands, cliffs, banks, and inlets adjacent, in every variety of mood or feature, from its glassiest calm to its angriest tempest, with endless patience, delight, and satisfaction. They enjoyed their work, and their work repaid them. It was almost all the payment they ever got, indeed, for, like loyal sons of the Cheyne Row Club, the crew of the *Mud-Turtle* were not successful. And now, as September was more than half through, Warren Relf began to bethink him at last of Hugh Massinger, whom he had left in rural ease on dry land at Whitestrand under a general promise to return for him "in the month of the long decline of roses," some time between the fifteenth and the twentieth. So, on a windy morning, about that precise period of the year, with a north-easterly breeze setting

strong across the North Sea, and a falling barometer threatening squalls, according to the printed weather report, he made his way out of the mouth of the Yare, and turned southward before the flowing tide in the direction of Whitestrand.

The sea was running high and splendid, and the two young painters, inured to toil and accustomed to danger, thoroughly enjoyed its wild magnificence. A storm to them was a study in action. They could take notes calmly of its fiercest moments. Almost every wave broke over the deck; and the patient little *Mud-Turtle*, with her flat bottom and centre-board keel, tossed about like a walnut shell on the surface of the water, or drove her nose madly from time to time into the crest of a billow, to emerge triumphant one moment later, all shining and dripping with sticky brine, in the deep trough on the other side. Painting in such a sea was of course simply impossible; but Warren Relf, who loved his art with supreme devotion, and never missed an opportunity of catching a hint from his ever-changing model under the most unpromising circumstances, took out pencil and

paper a dozen times in the course of the day to preserve at least in black and white some passing aspect of her mutable features. Potts for the most part managed sheet and helm; while Relf, in the intervals of luffing or tacking, holding hard to the mainmast with his left arm, and with the left hand just grasping his drawing-pad on the other side of the mast, jotted hastily down with his right whatever peculiar form of spray or billow happened for the moment to catch and impress his artistic fancy. It was a glorious day for those who liked it; though a land-lubber would no doubt have roundly called it a frightful voyage.

They had meant to make Whitestrand before evening; but half-way down, an incident of a sort that Warren Relf could never bear to miss intervened to delay them. They fell in casually with a North Sea trawler, disabled and distressed by last night's gale, now scudding under bare poles before the free breeze, that churned and whitened the entire surface of the German Ocean. The men on board were in sore straits, though not as yet in immediate danger; and the yawl

gallantly stood in close by her, to pick up the swimmers in case of serious accident. The shrill wind tore at her mainmast; the waves charged her in vague ranks; the gaff quivered and moaned at the shocks; and ever and anon, with a bellowing rush, the resistless sea swept over her triumphantly from stem to stern. Meanwhile, Warren Relf, eager to fix this stray episode on good white paper while it was still before his eyes, made wild and rapid dashes on his pad with a sprawling hand, which conveyed to his mind, in strange shorthand hieroglyphics, some faint idea of the scene as it passed before him.

"She's a terrible bad sitter, this smack," he observed in a loud voice to Potts, with good-humoured enthusiasm, as they held on together with struggling hands on the deck of the *Mud-Turtle*. "The moment you think you've just caught her against the skyline on the crest of a wave, she lurches again, and over she goes, plump down into the trough, before you've had a chance to make a single mark upon your sheet of paper. Ships are always precious bad sitters at the best of times; but when you and your model are

both plunging and tossing together in dirty weather on a loppy channel, I don't believe even Turner himself could make much out of it in the way of a sketch from nature.—Hold hard, there, Frank! Look out for your head! She's going to ship a thundering big sea across her bows this very minute.—By Jove! I wonder how the smack stood that last high wave!—Is she gone? Did it break over her? Can you see her ahead there?"

"She's all right still," Potts shouted from the bow, where he stood now in his oilskin suit, drenched from head to foot with the dashing spray, but cheery as ever, in true sailor fashion. "I can see her mast just showing above the crest. But it must have given her a jolly good wetting. Shall we signal the men to know if they'd like to come aboard here?"

"Signal away," Warren Relf answered good-humouredly above the noise of the wind. "No more sketching for me to-day, I take it. That last lot she shipped wet my pad through and through with the nasty damp brine. I'd better put my sketch, as far as it goes, down below in the locker. Wind's

freshening. We'll have enough to do to keep her nose straight in half a gale like this. We're going within four or five points of the wind now, as it is. I wish we could run clear ahead at once for the poplar at Whitestrand. I would, too, if it weren't for the smack. This is getting every bit as hot as I like it. But we must keep an eye upon her, if we don't want her crew to be all dead men. She can't live six hours longer in a gale like to-day's, I'll bet you any money."

They signalled the men, but found them unwilling still, with true seafaring devotion, to abandon their ship, which had yet some hours of life left in her. They'd stick to the smack, the skipper signalled back in mute pantomime, as long as her timbers held out the water. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to lie hard by her, for humanity's sake, as close as possible, and to make as slowly as the strength of the wind would allow, by successive tacks, for the river-mouth at Whitestrand.

All day long, they held up bravely, lurching and plunging on the angry waves; and only towards evening did they part company

with the toiling smack, as it was growing dusk along the low flat stretch of shore by Dunwich. There, a fish-carrier from the North Sea, one of those fast long steamers that plough the German Ocean on the look-out for the fishing fleet—whose catches they take up with all speed to the London market, fell in with them in the very nick of time, and transferring the crew on board with some little difficulty, make fast the smack—or rather her wreck—with a towline behind, and started under all steam to save her life for the port of Harwich. Warren Relf and his companion, despising such aid, and preferring to live it out by themselves at all hazards, were left behind alone with the wild evening, and proceeded in the growing shades of twilight to find their way up the river at Whitestrand.

"Can you make out the poplar, Frank?" Warren Relf shouted out, as he peered ahead into the deep gloom that enveloped the coast with its murky covering. "We've left it rather late, I'm afraid, for pushing up the creek with a sea like this! Unless we can spot the poplar distinctly, I should hardly like

to risk entering it by the red light on the sandhills alone. Those must be the lamps at Whitestrand Hall, the three windows to starboard yonder. The poplar ought to show by rights a point or so west of them, with the striped buoy just a little this side of it."

"I can make out the striped buoy by the white paint on it," his companion answered, gazing eagerly in front of him; "but I fancy it's a shade too dark now to be sure of the poplar. The lights of the Hall don't seem quite regular. Still, I should think we could make the creek by the red lantern and the beacon at the hithe, without minding the tree, if you care to risk it. You know your way up and down the river as well as any man living by this time; and we've got a fair breeze at our backs, you see, for going up the mouth to the bend at Whitestrand."

The wind moaned like a woman in agony. The timbers creaked and groaned and crackled. The black waves lashed savagely over the deck. The *Mud-Turtle* was almost on the shore before they knew it.

"Luff, luff!" Relf called out hastily, as he peered once more into the deepening gloom

with all his eyes. "By George! we're wrong. I can see the poplar—over yonder; do you catch it? We're out of our bearings a quarter of a mile. We've gone too far now to make it this tack. We must try again, and get our points better by the high light. That was a narrow squeak of it, by Jove, Frank! I can twig where we've got to now, distinctly. It's the lights in the house that led us astray. That's not the Hall: it's the windows of the vicarage."

They ran out to eastward again, for more sea-room, a couple of hundred yards, or farther, and tacked afresh for the entrance of the creek, this time adjusting their course better for the open mouth by the green lamp of the beacon on the sandhills. The light fixed on their own masthead threw a glimmering ray ahead from time to time upon the angry water. It was a hard fight for mastery with the wind. The waves were setting in fierce and strong towards the creek now; but the tide and stream on the other hand were ebbing rapidly and steadily outward. They always ebbed fast at the turn of the tide, as Relf knew well: a rushing current set in

then round the corner by the poplar tree, the same current that had carried out Hugh Massinger so resistlessly seaward in that little adventure of his on the morning of their first arrival at Whitestrand. Only an experienced mariner dare face that bar. But Warren Relf was accustomed to the coast, and made light of the danger that other men would have trembled at.

As they neared the poplar a second time, making straight for the mouth with nautical dexterity, a pale object on the port bow, rising and falling with each rise or fall of the waves on the bar, attracted Warren Relf's casual attention for a single moment by its strange weird likeness to a human figure. At first, he hardly regarded the thing seriously as anything more than a stray bit of floating wreckage; but presently, the light from the masthead fell full upon it, and with a sudden flash he felt convinced at once it was something stranger than a mere plank or fragment of rigging.

"Look yonder, Frank," he called out in echoing tones to his mate; "that can't be a buoy upon the port bow there!"

The other man looked at it long and steadily. As he looked, the *Mud-Turtle* lurched once more, and cast a reflected pencil ray of light from the masthead lamp over the surface of the sea, away in the direction of the suspicious object. Both men caught sight at once of some floating white drapery, swayed by the waves, and a pale face upturned in ghastly silence to the uncertain starlight.

"Port your helm hard!" Relf cried in haste. "It's a man overboard. Washed off the smack perhaps. He's drowned by this time, I expect, poor fellow."

His companion ported the helm at the word with all his might. The yawl answered well in spite of the breakers. With great difficulty, between wind and tide, they lay up towards the mysterious thing slowly in the very trough of the billows that roared and danced with hoarse joy over the shallow bar; and Relf, holding tight to the sheet with one hand, and balancing himself as well as he was able on the deck, reached out with the other a stout boathook to draw the tossing body alongside within hauling distance of the *Mud-Turtle*. As he did so, the body, eluding

his grasp, rose once more on the crest of the wave, and displayed to their view an open bosom and a long white dress, with a floating scarf or shawl of some thin material still hanging loose around the neck and shoulders. The face itself they couldn't as yet distinguish; it fell back languid beneath the spray at the top, so that only the throat and chin were visible; but by the dress and the open bosom alone, it was clear at once that the object they saw was not the corpse of a sailor. Warren Relf almost let drop the boathook in horror and surprise.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed, turning round excitedly, "it's a woman—a lady—dead—in the water!"

The billow broke, and curled over majestically with resistless force into the trough below them. Its undertow sucked the *Mud-Turtle* after it fiercely towards the shore, away from the body. With a violent effort, Warren Relf, lunging forward eagerly at the lurch, seized hold of the corpse by the floating scarf. It turned of itself as the hook caught it, and displayed its face in the pale starlight. A great awe fell suddenly upon the astonished

young painter's mind. It was indeed a woman that he held now by the dripping hair—a beautiful young girl, in a white dress; and the wan face was one he had seen before. Even in that dim half-light he recognized her instantly.

"Frank!" he cried out in a voice of hushed and reverent surprise—"never mind the ship. Come forward and help me. We must take her on board. I know her! I know her! She's a friend of Massinger's."

The corpse was one of the two young girls he had seen that day two months before sitting with their arms round one another's waists, close to the very spot where they now lay up, on the gnarled and naked roots of the famous old poplar.

CHAPTER X.

SHUFFLING IT OFF.

The day had been an eventful one for Hugh Massinger: the most eventful and pregnant of his whole history. As long as he lived, he could never possibly forget it. It was indeed a critical turning-point for three separate lives—his own, and Elsie's, and Winifred Meysey's. For, as Hugh had walked that morning, stick in hand and orchid in buttonhole, down the rose-embowered lane in the Squire's grounds with Winifred, he had asked the frightened, blushing girl, in simple and straightforward language, without any preliminary, to become his wife. His shy fish was fairly hooked at last, he thought now: no need for daintily playing his catch any longer; it was but a question, as things stood, of reel and of landing-net. The father

and mother, those important accessories, were pretty safe in their way too. He had sounded them both by unobtrusive methods, with dexterous plummets of oblique inquiry, and had gauged their profoundest depths of opinion with tolerable accuracy, as to settlements and other ante-nuptial precontracts of marriage. For what is the use of catching an heiress on your own rod, if your heiress's parents, upon whose testamentary disposition in the last resort her entire market value really depends, look askance with eyes of obvious disfavour upon your personal pretensions as their future son-in-law? Hugh Massinger was keen enough sportsman in his own line to make quite sure of his expected game before irrevocably committing himself to duck-shot cartridge. He was confident he knew his ground now; so, with a bold face and a modest assurance, he ventured, in a few plain and well-chosen words, to commend his suit, his hand, and his heart to Winifred Meysey's favourable attention.

It was a great sacrifice, and he felt it as such. He was positively throwing himself away upon Winifred. If he had followed his

own crude inclinations alone, like a romantic schoolboy, he would have waited for ever and ever for his cousin Elsie. Elsie was indeed the one true love of his youth. He had always loved her, and he would always love her. 'Twas foolish, perhaps, to indulge overmuch in these personal preferences, but after all it was very human; and Hugh acknowledged regretfully in his own heart that he was not entirely raised in that respect above the average level of human weaknesses. Still, a man, however humanesque, must not be governed by impulse alone. He must judge calmly, deliberately, impersonally, disinterestedly of his own future, and must act for the best in the long run by the light of his own final and judicial opinion. Now, Winifred was without doubt a very exceptional and eligible chance for a briefless barrister: your sucking poet doesn't get such chances of an undisputed heiress every day of the week, you may take your affidavit. If he let her slip by on sentimental grounds, and waited for Elsie—poor, dear old Elsie—heaven only knew how long they might both have to wait for one another—and perhaps

even then be finally disappointed. It was a foolish dream on Elsie's part; for, to say the truth, he himself had never seriously entertained it. The most merciful thing to Elsie herself would be to snap it short now, once for all, before things went further, and let her stand face to face with naked facts: ah, how hideously naked!—let her know she must either look out another husband somewhere for herself, or go on earning her own livelihood in maiden meditation, fancy free, for the remaining term of her natural existence. Hugh could never help ending up a subject, however unpleasant, even in his own mind, with a poetical tag: it was a trick of manner his soul had caught from the wonted peroration of his political leaders in the first editorial column of that exalted print, the *Morning Telephone*. So he made up his mind; and he proposed to Winifred.

The girl's heart gave a sudden bound, and the red blood flushed her somewhat pallid cheek with hasty roses as she listened to Hugh's graceful and easy avowal of the profound and unfeigned love that he proffered her. She thought of the poem Hugh had read her

aloud in his sonorous tones the evening before —much virtue in a judiciously selected passage of poetry, well marked in delivery:

"'He does not love me for my birth,
Nor for my lands so broad and fair:
He loves me for my own true worth,
And that is well,' said Lady Clare."

That was how Hugh Massinger loved her, she was quite sure. Had he not trembled and hesitated to ask her? Her bosom fluttered with a delicious fluttering; but she cast her eyes down, and answered nothing for a brief space. Then her heart gave her courage to look up once more, and to murmur back, in answer to his pleading look: "Hugh, I love you." And Hugh, carried away not ungracefully by the impulse of the moment, felt his own heart thrill responsive to hers in real earnest, and in utter temporary forgetfulness of poor betrayed and abandoned Elsie. They walked back to the Hall together next minute, whispering low, in the fool's paradise of first young love—a fool's paradise, indeed, for those two poor lovers, whose wooing set out under such evil auspices.

But when Hugh had left his landed prey at the front door of the square-built manor-house, and strolled off by himself towards the village inn, the difficulty about Elsie for the first time began to stare him openly in the face in all its real and horrid magnitude. He would have to confess and to explain to Elsie. Worse still, for a man of his mettle and his sensitiveness, he would have to apologize for and excuse his own conduct. That was unendurable—that was ignominious—that was even absurd. His virility kicked at it. There is something essentially insulting and degrading to one's manhood in having to tell a girl you've pretended to love, that you really and truly don't love her—that you only care for her in a sisterly fashion. It is practically to unsex one's self. A pretty girl appeals quite otherwise to the man that is in us. Hugh felt it bitterly and deeply—for himself, not for Elsie. He pitied his own sad plight most sincerely. But then, there was poor Elsie to think of too. No use in the world in blinking that. Elsie loved him very, very dearly. True, they had never been engaged to one another—so great is the

love of consistency in man, that even alone in his own mind Hugh continued to hug that translucent fiction; but she had been very fond of him, undeniably fond of him, and he had perhaps from time to time, by overt acts, unduly encouraged the display of her fondness. It gratified his vanity and his sense of his own power over women to do so: he could make them love him—few men more easily—and he liked to exercise that dangerous faculty on every suitable subject that flitted across his changeful horizon. The man with a mere passion for making conquests affords no serious menace to the world's happiness; but the man with an innate gift for calling forth wherever he goes all the deepest and truest instincts of a woman's nature, is—when he abuses his power—the most deadly, terrible, and cruel creature known in our age to civilized humanity. And yet he is not always deliberately cruel; sometimes, as in Hugh Massinger's case, he almost believes himself to be good and innocent.

He had warned Winifred to whisper nothing for the present to Elsie about this engagement of theirs. Elsie was his cousin,

he said—his only relation—and he would dearly like to tell her the secret of his heart himself in private. He would see her that evening, and break the news to her. "Why *break* it?" Winifred had asked in doubt, all unconscious. And Hugh, a strange suppressed smile playing uneasily about the corners of his thin lips, had answered with guileless alacrity of speech: "Because Elsie's like a sister to me, you know, Winifred; and sisters always to some extent resent the bare idea of their brothers marrying."

For as yet Elsie herself suspected nothing. It was best, Hugh thought, she should suspect nothing. That was a cardinal point in his easy-going practical philosophy of life. He never went half-way to meet trouble. Till Winifred had accepted him, why worry poor dear Elsie's gentle little soul with what was, after all, a mere remote chance, a contingent possibility? He would first make quite sure, by actual trial, where he stood with Winifred; and then—and then, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, he might let the whole truth burst in full force at once upon poor lonely Elsie's devoted head. Meanwhile, with extra-

ordinary cleverness and care, he continued to dissemble. He never made open love to Winifred before Elsie's face; on the contrary, he kept the whole small comedy of his relations with Winifred so skilfully concealed from her feminine eyes, that to the very last moment Elsie never even dreamt of her pretty pupil as a possible rival, or regarded her in any other conceivable light than as the nearest of friends and the dearest of sisters. Whenever Hugh spoke of Winifred to Elsie at all, he spoke of her lightly, almost slightingly, as a nice little girl, in her childish way—though much too blue-eyed—with a sort of distant bread-and-butterish schoolroom approbation, which wholly misled and hoodwinked Elsie as to his real intentions. And whenever he spoke of Elsie to Winifred, he spoke of her jestingly, with a good-humoured, unmeaning, brotherly affection that made the very notion of his ever contemplating marriage with her seem simply ridiculous. She was to him indeed as the deceased wife's sister is in the eye of the law to the British widower. With his easy, off-hand London cleverness, he had baffled and deceived both

those innocent, simple-minded, trustful women; and he stood face to face now with a general *éclaircissement* which could no longer be delayed, but whose ultimate consequences might perhaps prove fatal to all his little domestic arrangements.

Would Elsie in her anger set Winifred against him? Would Winifred, justly indignant at his conduct to Elsie, refuse, when she learned the whole truth, to marry him?

Nonsense—nonsense. No cause for alarm. He had never really been engaged to Elsie—he had said so to her face a thousand times. If Elsie chose to misinterpret his kind attentions, bestowed upon her solely as his one remaining cousin and kinswoman, the only other channel for the blood of the Massingers, surely Winifred would never be so foolish as to fall blindly into Elsie's self-imposed error, and to hold him to a bargain he had over and over again expressly repudiated. He was a barrister, and he knew his ground in these matters. Chitty on Contract lays it down as an established principle of English law that free consent of both parties forms a condition precedent and

essential part of the very existence of a compact of marriage.

With such transparent internal sophisms did Hugh Massinger strive all day to stifle and smother his own conscience; for every man always at least pretends to keep up appearances in his private relations with that inexorable domestic censor. But as evening came on, cigarette in mouth, he strolled round after dinner, by special appointment, to meet Elsie at the big poplar. They often met there, these warm summer nights; and on this particular occasion, anticipating trouble, Hugh had definitely arranged with Elsie beforehand to come to him by eight at the accustomed trysting-place. The Meyseys and Winifred had gone out to dinner at a neighbouring vicarage; but Elsie had stopped at home on purpose, on the hasty plea of some slight passing headache. Hugh had specially asked her to wait and meet him. Better get it all over at once, he thought to himself, in his shortsighted wisdom—like the measles or the chicken-pox—and know straight off exactly where he stood in his new position with these two women.

Women were the greatest nuisance in life. For his own part, now he came to look the thing squarely in the face, he really wished he was well quit of them all for good and ever.

He was early for his appointment; but by the tree he found Elsie, in her pretty white dress, already waiting for him. His heart gave a jump, a pleased jump, as he saw her sitting there before her time. Dear, dear Elsie; she was very, very fond of him! He would have given worlds to fling his arms tight around her then, and strain her to his bosom and kiss her tenderly. He would have given worlds, but not his reversionary chances in the Whitestrand property. Worlds don't count: the entire fee-simple of Mars and Jupiter would fetch nothing in the real-estate market. He was bound by contract to Winifred now, and he must do his best to break it gently to Elsie.

He stepped up and kissed her quietly on the forehead, and took her hand in his like a brother. Elsie let it lie in her own without remonstrance. They rose and walked in lovers' guise along the bank together. His

heart sank within him at the hideous task he had next to perform—nothing less than to break poor Elsie's heart for her. If only he could have shuffled out of it sideways anyhow! But shuffling was impossible. He hated himself; and he loved Elsie. Never till that moment did he know how he loved her.

This would never do! He was feeling like a fool. He crushed down the love sternly in his heart, and began to talk about indifferent subjects—the wind, the river, the rose-show at the vicarage. But his voice trembled, betraying him still against his will; and he could not refrain from stealing sidelong looks at Elsie's dark eyes now and again, and observing how beautiful she was, after all, in a rare and exquisite type of beauty. Winifred's blue eyes and light brown hair, Winifred's small mouth and moulded nose, Winifred's insipid smile and bashful blush, were cheap as dirt in the matrimonial lottery. She had but a doll-like, Lowther Arcade style of prettiness. Maidenly as she looked, one twist more of her nose, one shade lighter in her hair, and she would become simply bar-

maidenly. But Elsie's strong and powerful, earnest face, with its serious lips and its long black eyelashes, its profound pathos and its womanly dignity, its very irregularity and faultiness of outline, pleased him ten thousand times more than all your baby-faced beauties of the conventional, stereotyped, ballroom pattern. He looked at her long and sighed often. Must he really break her heart for her? At last he could restrain that unruly member, his tongue, no longer. "Elsie," he cried, eyeing her full in a genuine outburst of spontaneous admiration, "I never in my life saw any one anywhere one-half so beautiful and graceful as you are!"

Elsie smiled a pleased smile. "And yet," she murmured, with a half-malicious, teasing tone of irony, "we're not engaged, Hugh, after all, you remember."

Her words came at the very wrong moment; they brought the hot blood at a rush into Hugh's cheek. "No," he answered coldly, with a sudden revulsion and a spasmodic effort; "we're not engaged—nor ever will be, Elsie!"

Elsie turned round upon him with sudden

abruptness in blank bewilderment. She was not angry; she was not even astonished; she simply failed altogether to take in his meaning. It had always seemed to her so perfectly natural, so simply obvious that she and Hugh were sooner or later to marry one another; she had always regarded Hugh's frequent reminder that they were not engaged as such a mere playful warning against too much precipitancy; she had always taken it for granted so fully and unreservedly that whenever Hugh was rich enough to provide for a wife he would tell her so plainly, and carry out the implied engagement between them—that this sudden announcement of the exact opposite meant to her ears less than nothing. And now, when Hugh uttered those cruel, crushing, annihilating words, "Nor ever will be, Elsie," she couldn't possibly take in their reality at the first blush, or believe in her own heart that he really intended anything so wicked, so merciless, so unnatural.

"Nor ever will be!" she cried, incredulous. "Why, Hugh, Hugh, I—I don't understand you."

Hugh steeled his heart with a violent

strain to answer back in one curt, killing sentence: "I mean it, Elsie; I'm going to marry Winifred."

Elsie gazed back at him in speechless surprise. "Going to marry Winifred?" she echoed at last vaguely, after a long pause, as if the words conveyed no meaning to her mind. "Going to marry Winifred? To marry Winifred!—Hugh, did you really and truly say you were going to marry Winifred?"

"I proposed to her this morning," Hugh answered outright, with a choking throat and a glassy eye; "and she accepted me, Elsie; so I mean to marry her."

"Hugh!"

She uttered only that one short word, in a tone of awful and unspeakable agony. But her bent brows, her pallid face, her husky voice, her startled attitude, said more than a thousand words, however wild, could possibly have said for her. She took it in dimly and imperfectly now; she began to grasp what Hugh was talking about; but as yet she could not understand to the full all the man's profound and unfathomed infamy. She looked at him feebly for some word of ex-

planation. Surely he must have some deep and subtle reason of his own for this astonishing act and fact of furtive treachery. Some horrible combination of adverse circumstances, about which she knew and could know nothing, must have driven him against his will to this incredible solution of an insoluble problem. He could not of his own mere motion have proposed to Winifred. She looked at him hard: he quailed before her scrutiny.

"I love you, Elsie," he burst out with an irresistible impulse at last, as she gazed through and through him from her long black lashes.

Elsie laid her hand on his shoulder blindly. "You love me," she murmured. "Hugh, Hugh, you still love me?"

"I always loved you, Elsie," Hugh answered bitterly with a sudden pang of abject remorse; "and as long as I live I shall always love you."

"And yet — you are going to marry Winifred!"

"Elsie! We were never, never engaged."

She turned round upon him fiercely with

a burst of horror. He, to take refuge in that hollow excuse! "Never engaged!" she cried, aghast. "You mean it, Hugh?—you mean that mockery?—And I, who would have given up my life for love of you!"

He tried to assume a calm judicial tone. "Let us be reasonable, Elsie," he said, with an attempt at ease, "and talk this matter over without sentiment or hysterics. You knew very well I was too poor to marry; you knew I always said we were only cousins; you knew I had my way in life to make. You could never have thought I really and seriously dreamt of marrying you."

Elsie looked up at him with a scared white face. That Hugh should descend to such transparent futilities! "This is all new to me," she moaned out in a dazed voice. "All, all—quite, quite new to me."

"But, Elsie, I've said it over and over a thousand times before."

She gazed back at him like a stone. "Ah, yes; but till to-day," she murmured slowly, "you never, never, never meant it."

He sat down, unmanned, on the grass by the bank. She seated herself by his side,

mechanically as it were, with her hand on his arm, and looked straight in front of her with a vacant stare at the angry water. It was growing dark. The shore was dark, and the sea, and the river. Everything was dark and black and gloomy around her. She laid his hand one moment in her own. "Hugh!" she cried, turning towards him with appealing pathos, "you don't mean it now: you will never mean it. You're only saying it to try and prove me. Tell me it's that! You're yourself still. Oh, Hugh, my darling, you can never mean it!"

Her words burnt into his brain like liquid fire; and the better self within him groaned and faltered; but he crushed it down with an iron heel. The demon of avarice held his sordid soul. "My child," he said, with a tender inflection in his voice as he said it, "we must understand one another. I do seriously intend to marry Winifred Meysey."

"Why?"

There was a terrible depth of suppressed earnestness in that sharp short *why*, wrung out of her by anguish, as of a woman who asks the reason of her death-warrant. Hugh

Massinger answered it slowly and awkwardly with cumbrous, round-about, self-exculpating verbosity. As for Elsie, she sat like a statue and listened: rigid and immovable, she sat there still; while Hugh, for the very first time in her whole experience, revealed the actual man he really was before her appalled and horrified and speechless presence. He talked of his position, his prospects, his abilities. He talked of journalism, of the bar, of promotion. He talked of literature, of poetry, of fame. He talked of money, and its absolute need to man and woman in these latter days of ours. He talked of Winifred, of Whitestrand, and of the Meysey manor-house. "It'll be best in the end for us both, you know, Elsie," he said argumentatively, in his foolish rigmarole, mistaking her silence for something like unwilling acquiescence. "Of course I shall still be very fond of you, as I've always been fond of you—like a cousin only—and I'll be a brother to you now as long as I live; and when Winifred and I are really married, and I live here at Whitestrand, I shall be able to do a great deal more for you, and help you by every

means in my power, and introduce you freely into our own circle, on different terms, you know, where you'll have chances of meeting —well, suitable persons. You must see yourself it's the best thing for us both. The idea of two penniless people like you and me marrying one another in the present state of society is simply ridiculous."

She heard him out to the bitter end, revealing the naked deformity of his inmost nature, though her brain reeled at it, without one passing word of reproach or dissent. Then she said in an icy tone of utter horror: "Hugh!"

"Yes, Elsie."

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

"And *you* mean it?"

"I mean it."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, before you kill me outright, Hugh, Hugh! is it really true? Are you really like that? Do you really mean it?"

"I really mean to marry Winifred."

Elsie clasped her two hands on either side of her head, as if to hold it together from

bursting with her agony. "Hugh," she cried, "it's foolish, I know, but I ask you once more, before it's too late, in sight of heaven, I ask you solemnly, are you seriously in earnest? Is that what you're made of? Are you going to desert me? To desert and betray me?"

"I don't know what you mean," Hugh answered stonily, rising as if to go—for he could stand it no longer. "I've never been engaged to you. I always told you so. I owe you nothing. And now I mean to marry Winifred."

With a cry of agony, she burst wildly away from him. She saw it all now; she understood to the full the cruelty and baseness of the man's innermost underlying nature. Fair outside; but false, false, false to the core! Yet even so, she could scarcely believe it. The faith of a lifetime fought hard for life in her. He, that Hugh she had so loved and trusted—he, the one Hugh in all the universe—he to cast her off with such callous selfishness! He to turn upon her now with his empty phrases! He to sell and betray her for a Winifred and a manor-house!

Oh, the guilt and the sin of it! Her head reeled and swam round deliriously. She hardly knew what she felt or did. Mad with agony, love, and terror, she rushed away headlong from his polluted presence—not from Hugh, but from this fallen idol. He saw her white dress disappearing fast through the deep gloom in the direction of the poplar tree, and he groped his way after her, almost as mad as herself, struck dumb with remorse and awe and shame at the ruin he had visibly and instantly wrought in the fabric of that trustful girl's whole being.

One moment she fled and stumbled in the dark along the grassy path toward the roots of the poplar. Then he caught a glimpse of her for a second, dimly silhouetted in the faint starlight, a wan white figure with outstretched arms against the black horizon. She was poising, irresolute, on the gnarled roots. It was but for the twinkling of an eye that he saw her; next instant, a splash, a gurgle, a shriek of terror, and he beheld her borne wildly away, a helpless burden, by that fierce current towards the breakers that glistened white and roared

hoarsely in their savage joy on the bar of the river.

In her agony of disgrace, she had fallen, rather than thrown herself in. As she stood there, undecided, on the slippery roots, with all her soul burning within her, her head swimming and her eyes dim, a bruised, humiliated, hopeless creature, she had missed her foothold on the smooth worn stump, slimy with lichens, and raising her hands as if to balance herself, had thrown herself forward, half wittingly, half unconsciously, on the tender mercies of the rushing stream. When she returned for a moment, a little later, to life and thought, it was with a swirling sense of many waters, eddying and seething in mad conflict round her faint numb form. Strange roaring noises thundered in her ear. A choking sensation made her gasp for breath. What she drank in with her gasp was not air, but water—salt brackish water, an overwhelming flood of it. Then she sank again, and was dimly aware of the cold chill ocean floating around her on every side. She took a deep gulp, and with it sighed out her sense of life and action. Hugh was lost to her,

and it was all over. She could die now. She had nothing to live for. There was no Hugh; and she had not killed herself.

Those two dim thoughts were the last she knew as her eyes closed in the rushing current: there had never been a Hugh; and she had fallen in by accident.

CHAPTER IX.

SINK OR SWIM?

HUGH was selfish, heartless, and unscrupulous; but he was not physically a coward, a cur, or a palterer. Without one second's thought, he rushed wildly down to the water's edge, and balancing himself for a plunge, with his hands above his head, on the roots of the big tree, he dived boldly into that wild current, against whose terrific force he had once already struggled so vainly on the morning of his first arrival at Whitestrand. Elsie had had but a few seconds' start of him; with his powerful arms to aid him in the quest, he must surely overtake and save her before she could drown, even in that mad and swirling tidal torrent. He flung himself on the water with all his force, and goaded by remorse, pity, and love—for, after all, he loved her,

he loved her—he drew unwonted strength from the internal fires, as he pushed back the fierce flood on either side with arms and thews of feverish energy. At each strong push, he moved forward apace with the gliding current, and in the course of a few stout strokes he was already many yards on his way seaward from the point at which he had originally started. But his boots and clothes clogged his movements terribly, and his sleeves in particular so impeded his arms that he could hardly use them to any sensible advantage. He felt conscious at once that, under such hampering conditions, it would be impossible to swim for many minutes at a stretch. He must find Elsie and save her almost immediately, or both must go down and drown together.

He wanted nothing more than to drown with her now. "Elsie, Elsie, my darling Elsie!" he cried aloud on the top of the wave. To lose Elsie was to lose everything. The sea was running high as he neared the bar, and Elsie had disappeared as if by magic. Even in that dark black water on that moonless night he wondered he couldn't catch

a single glimpse of her white dress by the reflected starlight. But the truth was, the current had sucked her under—sucked her under wildly with its irresistible force, only to fling her up again, a senseless burden, where sea and river met at last in fierce conflict among the roaring breakers that danced and shivered upon the shallow bar.

He swam about blindly, looking round him on every side through the thick darkness with eager eyes for some glimpse of Elsie's white dress in a stray gleam of starlight; but he saw not a trace of her presence anywhere. Groping and feeling his way still with numbed limbs, that grew weary and stiff with the frantic effort, he battled on through the gurgling eddy till he reached the breakers on the bar itself. There, his strength proved of no avail—he might as well have tried to stem Niagara. The great waves, rolling their serried line against the stream from the land, caught him and twisted him about resistlessly, raising him now aloft on their foaming crest, dashing him now down deep in their hollow trough, and then flinging him back again over some great curling mountain

of water far on to the current from which he had just emerged with his stout endeavour. For ten minutes or more he struggled madly against those titanic enemies; then his courage and his muscle failed together, and he gave up the unequal contest out of sheer fatigue and physical inability to continue it longer. It was indeed an awful and appalling situation. Alone there in the dark, whirled about by a current that no man could stem, and confronted with a rearing wall of water that no man could face, he threw himself wearily back for a moment at full length, and looked up in his anguish from his floating couch to the cold stars overhead, whose faint light the spray every instant hid from his sight as it showered over him from the curling great crests of the great billows beyond him. And it was to this that he had driven poor innocent, trustful, wronged Elsie! the one woman he had ever truly loved! the one woman who, with all the force of a profound nature—profounder ten thousand times than his own—had truly loved him!

Elsie was tossing up and down there just as hopelessly now, no doubt. But Elsie had

no pangs of conscience added to torment her. *She* had only a broken heart to reckon with.

He let himself float idly where wind and waves might happen to bear him. There was no help for it: he could swim no farther. It was all over, all over now. Elsie was lost, and for all the rest he cared that moment less than nothing. Winifred! He scorned and hated her very name. He might drown at his ease, for anything he would ever do himself to prevent it. The waves broke over him again and again. He let them burst across his face or limbs, and floated on, without endeavouring to swim or guide himself at all. Would he never sink? Was he to float and float and float like this to all eternity?

Roar—roar—roar on the bar, each roar growing fainter and fainter in his ears. Clearly receding, receding still. The current was carrying him away from it now, and whirling him along in a back eddy, that set strongly south-westward towards the dike of the salt marshes.

He let himself drift wherever it might take him. It took him back, back, back, steadily, till he saw the white crest of the breakers on

the ridge extend like a long gray line in the dim distance upon the sea beyond him. He was well into safer water by this time: the estuary was only very rough here. He might swim if he chose. But he did not choose. He cared nothing for life, since Elsie was gone. In a sudden revulsion of wild despair, a frantic burst of hopeless yearning, he knew, for the first ime in his whole life, now it was too late, how truly and deeply and intensely he had loved her. As truly and deeply as he was capable of loving anybody or anything on earth except himself. And that, after all, was nothing much to boast of.

Still, it was enough to overwhelm him for the moment with agonies of remorse and regret and pity, and to make him long just then and there for instant death, as the easiest escape from his own angry and accusing conscience. He wanted to die; he yearned and prayed for it. But death obstinately refused to come to his aid. He turned himself round on his face now, and striking out just once with his wearied thighs, gazed away blankly towards the foam on the bar,

where Elsie's body must still be tossing in a horrible ghastly dance of death among the careering breakers.

As he looked, a gleam of ruddy light showed for a second from a masthead just beyond the bar. A smack—a smack! coming in to the river! The sight refilled him with a faint fresh hope. That hope was too like despair; but still it was something. He swam out once more with the spasmodic energy of utter despondency. The smack might still be in time to save Elsie! He would make his way out to it, though it ran him down; if it ran him down, so much the better! he would shout aloud at the top of his voice, to outroar the breakers: "A lady is drowning! Save her!—save her!"

He struck out again with mad haste through the back current. This time, he had to fight against it with his wearied limbs, and to plough his way by prodigious efforts. The current was stronger, now he came to face it, than he had at all imagined when he merely let himself drift on its surface. Battling with all his might against the fierce swirls, he hardly seemed to make

any headway at all through the angry water. His strength was almost all used up now; he could scarcely last till he reached the smack. —Great heavens, what was this? She was turning!—she was turning! The surf was too much for her timbers to endure. She couldn't make the mouth of the creek. She was luffing seaward again, and it was all up, all up with Elsie.

It was Warren Relf's yawl, bearing down from Lowestoft, and trying for the first time to enter the river through the wall of breakers.

Oh, if only he had lain right in her path just then, as she rode over the waves, that she might run him down and sink him for ever, with his weight of infamy, beneath those curling billows! He could never endure to go ashore again—and to feel that he had virtually murdered Elsie.

Elsie, Elsie, poor murdered Elsie! He should hate to live, now he had murdered Elsie!

And then, as he battled still fiercely with the tide, in a flash of his nerves, he felt suddenly a wild spasm of pain seize on both

his thighs, and an utter disablement affect his entire faculty of bodily motion. It was a paroxysm of cramp—overwhelming—inexpressible—and it left him in one second powerless to move or think or act or plan, a mere dead log, incapable of anything but a cry of pain, and helpless as a baby in the midst of that cruel and unheeding eddy.

He flung himself back for dead on the water once more. A choking sensation seized hold of his senses. The sea was pouring in at his nostrils and his ears. He knew he was going, and he was glad to know it. He would rather die than live with that burden of guilt upon his black soul. The waves washed over his face in serried ranks. He didn't mind: he didn't struggle; he didn't try for one instant to save himself. He floated on, unconscious at last, back, slowly back, towards the bank of the salt marsh.

When Hugh Massinger next knew anything, he was dimly conscious of lying at full length on a very cold bed, and fumbling with his fingers to pull the bed-clothes closer around him. But there were no bed-clothes,

and everything about was soaking wet. He must be stretched in a pool of water, he thought—so damp it was all round to the touch—with a soft mattress or couch spread beneath him. He put out his hands to feel the mattress. He came upon mud, mud, deep layers of mud; all cold and slimy in the dusk of night. And then with a flash he remembered all—Elsie dead! Elsie drowned!—and knew he was stranded by the ebbing tide on the edge of the embankment. No hope of helping Elsie now. With a violent effort, he roused himself to consciousness, and crawled feebly on his knees to the firm ground. It was difficult work, floundering through the mud, with his numb limbs; but he floundered on, upon hands and feet, till he reached the shore, and stood at last, dripping with brine and crusted with soft slimy tidal ooze, on the broad bank of the moated dike that hemmed in the salt marshes from the mud-bank of the estuary. It was still dark night, but the moon had risen. He could hardly say what the time might be, for his watch had stopped, of course, by immersion in the water; but he roughly guessed, by the look of the stars, it

was somewhere about half-past ten. We have a vague sense of the lapse of time even during sleep or other unconscious states; and Hugh was certain he couldn't have been floating for much more than an hour or thereabouts.

He gazed around him vaguely at the misty meadows. He was a mile or more from the village inn. The estuary, with its acrid flats of mud, lay between him and the hard at Whitestrand. Sheets of white surf still shimmered dimly on the bar far out to sea. And Elsie was lost—lost to him irrevocably.

He sat down and pondered on the bank for a while. Those five minutes were the turning-point of his life. What should he do and how comport himself under these sudden and awful and unexpected circumstances? Dazed as he was, he saw even then the full horror of the dilemma that hedged him in. Awe and shame brought him back with a rush to reason. If he went home and told the whole horrid truth, everybody would say he was Elsie's murderer. Perhaps they would even suggest that he pushed her in—to get rid of her. He dared not tell it; he dared not face

it. Should he fly the village—the county—the country?—That would be foolish and precipitate indeed, not to say wicked: a criminal surrender. All was not lost, though Elsie was lost to him. In his calmer mood, no longer heroic with the throes of despondency, sitting shivering there with cold in the keen breeze, between his dripping clothes, upon the bare swept bank, he said to himself many times over that all was not lost; he might still go back—and marry Winifred.

Hideous—horrible—ghastly—inhuman: he reckoned even so his chances with Winifred.

The shrewd wind blew chill upon his wet clothes. It bellowed and roared with hoarse groans round the stakes on the dike-sluices. His head was whirling still with asphyxia and numbness. He felt hardly in a condition to think or reason. But this was a crisis, a life-and-death crisis. He must pull himself together like a man, and work it all out, his doubtful course for the next three hours, or else sink for ever in a sea of obloquy, remembered only as Elsie's murderer. Everything was at stake for him—live or die. Should

he jump once more into the cold wild stream —or go home quietly like a sensible man, and play his hand out to marry Winifred?

If he meant to go, he must go at once. It was no use to think of delaying or shilly-shallying. By eleven o'clock, the inn would be closed. He must steal in, unperceived, by the open French windows before eleven, if he intended still to keep the game going. But he must have his plan of action definitely mapped out none the less beforehand; and to map it out, he must wait a moment still; he must sum up chances in this desperate emergency.

Life is a calculus of varying probabilities. Was it likely he had been perceived at the Hall that evening? Did anybody know he had been walking with Winifred?

He fancied not—he believed not.—He was certain not, now he came to think of it. Thank heaven, he had made the appointment verbally. If he'd written a note, that damning evidence might have been produced against him at the coroner's inquest. Inquest? Unless they found the body—Elsie's body—pah! how horrible to think of—but still, a

man must steel himself to face facts, however ghastly and however horrible. Unless they found the body, then, there would be no inquest; and if only things were managed well and cleverly, there needn't even be any inquiry. Unless they found the body—Elsie's body!—poor Elsie's body, whirled about by the waves!—But they would never find it—they would never find it. The current had sucked it under at once, and carried it away careering madly to the sea. It would toss and whirl on the breakers for a while, and then sink unseen to the fathomless abysses of the German Ocean.

He hated himself for thinking all this—with Elsie drowned—or not yet drowned even—and yet he thought it, because he was not man enough to face the alternative.

Had Elsie told any one she was going to meet him? No; she wouldn't even tell Winifred of that, he was sure. She met him there often by appointment, it was true, but always quietly: they kept their meetings a profound secret between them.

Had any one seen them that evening together? He couldn't remember noticing

anybody.—How shrill the wind blew through his dripping clothes. It cut him in two; and his head reeled still.—No; nobody, nobody. He was quite safe upon that score at least. Nobody knew he was out with Elsie.

Could he go back, then, and keep it all quiet, saying nothing himself, but leaving the world to form its own conclusions? A sudden thought flashed in an intuitive moment across his brain. A Plan!—a Plan! How happy! A Policy! He saw his way out of it all at once. He could set everything right by a simple method. Yes, that would do. It was bold, but not risky. He might go now: the scheme for the future was all matured. Nobody need ever suspect anything. A capital idea! Honour was saved; and he might still go back and marry Winifred.

Elsie dead! Elsie drowned! The world lost, and his life a blank! But he might still go back and marry Winifred.

He rose, and shook himself in the wind like a dog. The Plan was growing more definite and rounded in his mind each moment.

He turned his face slowly towards the lights at Whitestrand. The estuary spread between him and them with its wide mud-flats. Cold and tired as he was, he must make at all speed for the point where it narrowed into the running stream near Snade meadows. He must swim the river there, with what legs he had left, and cross to the village. There was no time to be lost. It was neck or nothing. At all hazards, he must do his best to reach the inn before the doors were shut and locked at eleven.

When he left the spot where he had been tossed ashore, his idea for the future was fully worked out. He ran along the bank with eager haste in the direction of Whitestrand. Once only did he turn and look behind him. A ship's light gleamed feebly in the offing across the angry sea. She was beating up against a head wind to catch the breeze outside towards Lowestoft or Yarmouth.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PLAN IN EXECUTION.

Hugh hurried along the dike that bounded the salt-marsh meadows seaward, till he reached the point in his march up where the river narrowed abruptly into a mere third-class upland stream. There he jumped in, and swam across, as well as he was able in the cold dark water, to the opposite bank. Once over, he had still to straggle as best he might through two or three swampy fields, and to climb a thickset hedge or so—regular bullfinches—before he fairly gained the belated little high-road. His head swam. Wet and cold and miserable without, he was torn within by conflicting passions; but he walked firm and erect now along the winding road in the deep gloom, fortunately never meeting

a soul in the half-mile or so of lonely way that lay between the point where he had crossed the stream and the Fisherman's Rest by the bank at Whitestrand. He was glad of that, for it was his cue now to escape observation. In his own mind, he felt himself a murderer; and every flicker of the wind among the honeysuckle in the hedge, every rustle of the leaves on the trees overhead, every splash of the waves upon the distant shore, made his heart flutter, and his breath stop short in response, though he gave no outer sign of fear or compunction in his even tread and erect bearing—the even tread and erect bearing of a proud, self-confident, English gentleman.

How lucky that his rooms at the inn happened to be placed on the ground-floor, and that they opened by French windows down to the ground on to the little garden! How lucky, too, that they lay on the hither side of the door and the taproom, where men were sitting late over their mug of beer, singing and rollicking in vulgar mirth with their loud half-Danish, East-Anglian merriment! He stole through the garden on tiptoe, un-

perceived, and glided like a ghost into the tiny sitting-room. The lamp burned brightly on the parlour table, as it had burnt all evening, in readiness for his arrival. He slipped quietly, on tiptoe still, into the bedroom behind, tossed off a stiff glassful of brandy-and-water cold, and changed his clothes from head to foot with as much speed and noiselessness as circumstances permitted. Then, treading more easily, he went out once more with a bold front into the other room, flung himself down at his ease in the big armchair, took up a book, pretending to read, and rang the bell with ostentatious clamour for the good landlady. His plan was mature; he would proceed to put it into execution.

The landlady, a plentiful body of about fifty, came in with evident surprise and hesitation. "Lord a' mussy, sar," she cried aloud in a slight flurry, "I thowt yow war out; an' them min a-singin' and a-bellerin' like that oover there in the bar! Stannaway 'll be some riled when he find yow're come in an' all that noise gooin' on in the house! Teen't respectable. But we din't hear ye. I hoop yow'll 'scuse 'em: they're oonly the

fishermen from Snade, enjoyin' theirselves in the cool of the evenin'."

Hugh made a manful effort to appear unconcerned. "I came in an hour ago or more," he replied, smiling—a sugar-of-lead smile. "But pray, don't interfere with these good people's merriment for worlds, I beg of you. I should be sorry, indeed, if I thought I put a stopper upon anybody's innocent amusement anywhere. I don't want to be considered a regular kill-joy.—I rang the bell, Mrs. Stannaway, for a bottle of seltzer."

It was a simple way of letting them know he was really there; and though the lie about the length of time he had been home was a fairly audacious one—for somebody might have come in meanwhile to trim the lamp, or look if he was about, and so detect the falsehood—he saw at once, by Mrs. Stannaway's face, that it passed muster without rousing the slightest suspicion.

"Why, William," he heard her say when she went out, in a hushed voice to her husband in the taproom, "Mr. Massinger hev bin in his own room the whool time, while them chaps hev bin a-shoutin' an' swearin'

suffin frightful out here, more like heathen than human critters."

Then, they hadn't noticed his absence, at any rate! That was well. He was so far safe. If the rest of his plan held water equally, all might yet come right—and he might yet succeed in marrying Winifred.

To save appearances—and marry Winifred! With Elsie still tossing on the breakers of the bar, he had it in his mind to marry Winifred!

When Mrs. Stannaway brought in the seltzer, Hugh Massinger merely looked up from the book he was reading with a pleasant nod and a murmured "Thank you." 'Twas the most he dared. His teeth chattered so he could hardly trust himself to speak any further; but he tried with an agonized effort within to look as comfortable under the circumstances as possible. As soon as she was gone, however, he opened the seltzer, and pouring himself out a second strong dose of brandy, tossed it off at a gulp, almost neat, to steady his nerves for serious business. Then he opened his blotting-book, with a furtive glance to right and left, and took out

a few stray sheets of paper—to write a letter. The first sheet had some stanzas of verse scribbled loosely upon it, with many corrections. Hugh's eyes unconsciously fell upon one of them. It read to him just then like an act of accusation. They were some simple lines describing some ideal utopian world—a dream of the future—and the stanza on which his glance had lighted so carelessly ran thus :

"But, fairer and purer still,
True love is there to behold;
And none may fetter his will
With law or with gold:
And none may sully his wings
With the deadly taint of lust;
But freest of all free things
He soars from the dust."

"With law or with gold," indeed! Fool! Idiot! Jackanapes! He crumpled the verses angrily in his hand as he looked, and flung them with clenched teeth into the empty fireplace. His own words rose up in solemn judgment against him, and condemned him remorselessly by anticipation. He had sold Elsie for Winifred's gold, and the Nemesis of his crime was already pursuing him like a

deadly phantom through all his waking moments.

With a set cold look on his handsome dark face, he selected another sheet of clean white note-paper from the morocco-covered blotting-book, and then pulled a bundle of old, worn-edged letters from his breast-pocket—a bundle of letters in a girl's handwriting, secured by an elastic india-rubber band, and carefully numbered with red ink from one to seventy, in the order they were received in. Hugh was nothing, indeed, if not methodical. In his own way, he had loved Elsie, as well as he was capable of loving anybody: he had kept every word she ever wrote to him; and now that she was gone—dead and gone for ever—her letters were all he had left that belonged to her. He laid one down on the table before him, and yielding to a momentary impulse of ecstasy, he kissed it first with reverent tenderness. It was Elsie's letter—poor dead Elsie's.—Elsie dead! He could hardly realize it.—His brain whirled and swam with the manifold emotions of that eventful evening. But he must brace himself up for his part like a man. He *must* not

be weak. There was work to do; he must make haste to do it.

He took a broad-nibbed pen carefully from his desk—the broadest he could find—and fitted it with pains to his ivory holder. Elsie always used a broad nib—poor drowned Elsie—dear, martyred Elsie! Then, glancing sideways at her last letter, he wrote on the sheet, in a large flowing angular hand, deep and black, most unlike his own, which was neat and small and cramped and rounded, the two solitary words, "My darling." He gazed at them when done with evident complacency. They would do very well: an excellent imitation!

Was he going, then, to copy Elsie's letter? No; for its first words read plainly, "My own darling Hugh." He had allowed her to address him in such terms as that; but still, he muttered to himself even now, he was never engaged to her—never engaged to her. In copying, he omitted the word "own." That, he thought, would probably be considered quite too affectionate for any reasonable probability. Even in emergencies he was cool and collected. But "My darling,"

was just about the proper mean. Girls are always stupidly gushing in their expression of feeling to one another. No doubt Elsie herself would have begun, "My darling."

After that, he turned over the letters with careful scrutiny, as if looking down the pages one by one for some particular phrase or word he wanted. At last he came upon the exact thing: "Mrs. Meysey and Winifred are going out to-morrow."—"That'll do," he said in his soul to himself: "a curl to the *w*," —and laying the blank sheet once more before him, he wrote down boldly, in the same free hand, with thick black down-strokes, "My darling Winifred."

The Plan was shaping itself clearly in his mind now. Word by word he fitted in so, copying each direct from Elsie's letters, and dovetailing the whole with skilled literary craftsmanship into a curious cento of her pet phrases, till at last, after an hour's hard and anxious work, round drops of sweat standing meanwhile cold and clammy upon his hot forehead, he read it over with unmixed approbation—to himself—an excellent letter both in design and execution.

"Whitestrand Hall,
"September 17.

"My darling Winifred,

"I can hardly make up my mind to write you this letter; and yet I must: I can no longer avoid it. I know you will think me so wicked, so ungrateful: I know Mrs. Meysey will never forgive me; but I can't help it. Circumstances are too strong for me. By the time this reaches you, I shall have left Whitestrand, I fear for ever. Why I am leaving, I can never, never, never tell you. If you try to find out, you won't succeed in discovering it. I know what you'll think; but you're quite mistaken. It's something about which you have never heard; something that I've told to nobody anywhere; something I can never, never tell, even to you, darling. I've written a line to explain to Hugh; but it's no use either of you trying to trace me. I shall write to you some day again to let you know how I'm getting on—but never my whereabouts.—Darling, for heaven's sake, do try to hush this up as much as you can. To have myself discussed by half the county would drive me mad with

despair and shame. Get Mrs. Meysey to say I've been called away suddenly by private business, and will not return. If only you knew all, you would forgive me everything.—Good-bye, darling. Don't think too harshly of me.

"Ever your affectionate, but heart-broken,

"ELSIE."

His soul approved the style and the matter. Would it answer his purpose? he wondered, half tremulously. Would they really believe Elsie had written it, and Elsie was gone? How account for her never having been seen to quit the grounds of the Hall? For her not having been observed at Almundham Station? For no trace being left of her by rail or road, or sea or river? It was a desperate card to play, he knew, but he held no other; and fortune often favours the brave. How often at loo had he stood against all precedent upon a hopeless hand, and swept the board in the end by some audacious stroke of inspired good play, or some strange turn of the favouring chances! He would stand to win now in the same spirit on the forged letter. It was his

one good card. Nobody could ever prove he wrote it. And perhaps, with the unthinking readiness of the world at large, they would all accept it without further question.

If ever Elsie's body were recovered! Ah, yes: true: that would indeed be fatal. But then, the chances were enormously against it. The deep sea holds its own: it yields up its dead only to patient and careful search; and who would ever dream of searching for Elsie? Except himself, she had no one to search for her. The letter was vague and uncertain, to be sure; but its very vagueness was infinitely better than the most definite lie: it left open the door to so much width of conjecture. Every man could invent his own solution. If he had tried to tell a plausible story, it might have broken down when confronted with the inconvenient detail of stern reality: but he had trusted everything to imagination. And imagination is such a charmingly elastic faculty! The Meyseys might put their own construction upon it. Each, no doubt, would put a different one; and each would be convinced that his own was the truest.

He folded it up and thrust it into an

envelope. Then he addressed the face boldly, in the same free black hand as the letter itself, to "Miss Meysey, The Hall, Whitestrand." In the corner he stuck the identical little monogram, E. C., written with the strokes crossing each other, that Elsie put on all her letters. His power of imitating the minutest details of any autograph stood him here in good stead. It was a perfect fac-simile, letter and address: and tortured as he was in his own mind by remorse and fear, he still smiled to himself an approving smile as he gazed at the absolutely undetectable forgery. No expert on earth could ever detect it. "That'll clinch all," he thought serenely. "They'll never for a moment doubt that it comes from Elsie."

He knew the Meyseys had gone out to dinner at the vicarage that evening, and would not return until after the hour at which Elsie usually retired. As soon as they got back, they would take it for granted she had gone to bed, as she always did, and would in all probability never inquire for her. If so, nothing would be known till to-morrow at breakfast. He must drop the letter into the

box unperceived to-night, and then it would be delivered at Whitestrand Hall in due course by the first post to-morrow.

He shut the front window, put out the lamp, and stole quietly into the bedroom behind. That done, he opened the little lattice into the back garden, and slipped out, closing the window loosely after him, and blowing out the candle. The post-office lay just beyond the church. He walked there fast, dropped his letter in safety into the box, and turned, unseen, into the highroad once more in the dusky moonlight.

Wearied and faint and half delirious as he was after his long immersion, he couldn't even now go back to the inn to rest quietly. Elsie's image haunted him still. A strange fascination led him across the fields and through the lane to the Hall—to Elsie's last dwelling-place. He walked in by the little side-gate, the way he usually came to visit Elsie, and prowled guiltily to the back of the house. The family had evidently returned, and suspected nothing: no sign of bustle or commotion or disturbance betrayed itself anywhere: not a light showed from a single

window: all was dark and still from end to end, as if poor dead Elsie were sleeping calmly in her own little bedroom in the main building. It was close on one in the morning now. Hugh skulked and prowled around the east wing on cautious tiptoe, like a convicted burglar.

As he passed Elsie's room, all dark and empty, a mad desire seized upon him all at once to look in at the window and see how everything lay within there. At first, he had no more reason for the act in his head than that: the Plan only developed itself further as he thought of it. It wouldn't be difficult to climb to the sill by the aid of the porch and the clambering wistaria. He hesitated a moment; then remorse and curiosity finally conquered. The romantic suggestion came to him, like a dream, in his fevered and almost delirious condition: like a dream, he carried it at once into effect. Groping and feeling his way with numb fingers, dim eyes, and head that still reeled and swam in terrible giddiness from his long spell of continued asphyxia, he raised himself cautiously to the level of the sill, and prised the window open

with his dead white hand. The lamp on the table, though turned down so low that he hadn't observed its glimmer from outside, was still alight and burning faintly. He turned it up just far enough to see through the gloom his way about the bedroom. The door was closed, but not locked. He twisted the key noiselessly with dexterous pressure, so as to leave it fastened from the inside.—That was a clever touch!—They would think Elsie had climbed out of the window.

A few letters and things lay loose about the room. The devil within him was revelling now in hideous suggestions. Why not make everything clear behind him? He gathered them up and stuck them in his pocket. Elsie's small black leather bag stood on a wooden frame in the far corner. He pushed into it hastily the nightdress on the bed, the brush and comb, and a few selected articles of underclothing from the chest of drawers by the tiled fireplace. The drawers themselves he left sedulously open. It argued haste. If you choose to play for a high stake, you must play boldly, but you must play well. Hugh never for a moment concealed from himself

the fact that the adversary against whom he was playing now was the public hangman, and that his own neck was the stake at issue.

If ever it was discovered that Elsie was drowned, all the world, including the enlightened British jury—twelve butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers, selected at random from the Whitestrand rabble, he said to himself angrily—would draw the inevitable inference for themselves that Hugh had murdered her. His own neck was the stake at issue—his own neck, and honour and honesty.

He glanced around the room with an approving eye once more. It was capital! Splendid! Everything was indeed in most admired disorder. The very spot it looked, in truth, from which a girl had escaped in a breathless hurry. He left the lamp still burning at half-height: that fitted well; lowered the bag by a piece of tape to the garden below; littered a few stray handkerchiefs and lace bodices loosely on the floor; and crawling out of the window with anxious care, tried to let himself down hand over hand by a branch of the wistaria.

The branch snapped short with an ugly crack; and Hugh found himself one second later on the shrubbery below, bruised and shaken.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT SUCCESS?

At the Meyseys' next morning, all was turmoil and surprise. The servants' hall fluttered with unwonted excitement. No less an event than an elopement was suspected. Miss Elsie had not come down to breakfast; and when Miss Winifred went up, on the lady's-maid's report, to ask what was the matter, she had found the door securely locked on the inside, and received no answer to her repeated questions. The butler, hastily summoned to the rescue, broke open the lock; and Winifred entered, to find the lamp still feebly burning at half-height, and a huddled confusion everwhere pervading the disordered room. Clearly, some strange thing had occurred. Elsie's drawers had been opened and searched: the black bag was gone from

the stand in the corner; and the little jewel-case with the silver shield on the top was missing from its accustomed place on the dressing-table.

With a sudden cry, Winifred rushed forward, terrified. Her first idea was the usual feminine one of robbery and murder. Elsie was killed—killed by a burglar. But one glance at the bed dispelled that illusion; it had never been slept in. The nightdress and the little embroidered nightdress-bag in red silk were neither of them there in their familiar fashion. The brush and comb had disappeared from the base of the looking-glass. The hairpins even had been removed from the glass hairpin box. These indications seemed frankly inconsistent with the theory of mere intrusive burglary. The enterprising burglar doesn't make up the beds of the robbed and murdered, after pocketing their watches; nor does he walk off, as a rule, with ordinary hairbrushes and embroidered nightdress-bags. Surprised and alarmed, Winifred rushed to the window: it was open still: a branch of the wistaria lay broken on the ground, and the mark

of a falling body might be easily observed among the plants and soil in the shrubbery border.

By this time, the Squire had appeared upon the scene, bringing in his hand a letter for Winifred. With the cool common sense of advancing years, he surveyed the room in its littery condition, and gazed over his daughter's shoulder as she read the shadowy and incoherent jumble of phrases Hugh Massinger had strung together so carefully in Elsie's name last night at the Fisherman's Rest. "Whew!" he whistled to himself in sharp surprise as the state of the case dawned slowly upon him. "Depend upon it, there's a young man at the bottom of this. "Cherchez la femme," says the French proverb. When a young woman's in question, "Cherchez l'homme" comes very much nearer it. The girl's run off with *somebody*, you may be sure. I only hope she's run off all straight and above-board, and not gone away with a groom or a gamekeeper or a married clergyman."

"Papa!" Winifred cried, laying down the letter in haste and bursting into tears, "do

you think Mr. Massinger can have anything to do with it?"

The Squire had been duly apprised last night by Mrs. Meysey—in successive instalments—as to the state of relations between Hugh and Winifred; but his blunt English nature cavalierly rejected the suggested explanation of Elsie's departure, and he brushed it aside at once after the fashion of his kind with an easy "Bless my soul! no, child. The girl's run off with some fool somewhere. It's always fools who run off with women. Do you think a man would be idiot enough to"—he was just going to say, "propose to one woman in the morning, and elope with another the evening after?" but he checked himself in time, before the faces of the servants, and finished his sentence lamely by saying instead, "commit himself so with a girl of that sort?"

"That wasn't what I meant, papa," Winifred whispered low. "I meant, could she have fancied?—— You understand me."

The Squire gave a snort in place of *No*. Impossible, impossible; the young man was so well connected. She could never have

thought he meant to make up to *her*. Much more likely, if it came to that, the girl would run away *with* him than *from* him. Young women don't really run away from a man because their hearts are broken. They go up to their own bedrooms instead, and muse and mope over it, and cry their eyes red.

And indeed, the Squire remarked to himself inwardly on the other hand, that if Hugh were minded to elope with any one, he would be far more likely to elope with the heiress of Whitestrand than with a penniless governess like Elsie Challoner. Elopement implies parental opposition. Why the deuce should a man take the trouble to run away with an undowered orphan, whom nobody on earth desires to prevent him from marrying any day, in the strictly correctest manner, by banns or license, at the parish church of her own domicile? The suggestion was clearly quite quixotic. If Elsie had run away with any one, it was neither from nor with this young man of Winifred's, the Squire felt sure, but with the gardener's son or with the under-gamekeeper.

Still, he felt distinctly relieved in his own

mind when, at half-past ten, Hugh Massinger strolled idly in, a rose in his button-hole and a smile on his face—though a little lame of the left leg—all unconscious, apparently, that anything out of the common had happened since last night at the great house.

Hugh was one of the very finest and most finished actors then performing on the stage of social England; but even he had a difficult part to play that stormy morning, and he went through his *rôle*, taking it altogether, with but indifferent success, though with sufficient candour to float him through unsuspected somehow. The circumstances, indeed, were terribly against him. When he fell the night before from Elsie's window, he had bruised and shaken himself, already fatigued as he was by his desperate swim and his long unconsciousness; and it was with a violent effort, goaded on by the sense of absolute necessity alone, that he picked himself up, black bag and all, and staggered home, with one ankle strained, to his rooms at the Stannaways'. Once arrived there, after that night of terrors and manifold adventures, he locked away Elsie's belongings cautiously in

a back cupboard—incriminating evidence, indeed, if anything should ever happen to come out—and flung himself half undressed at last in a fever of fatigue upon the bed in the corner.

Strange to say, he slept—slept soundly. Worn out with overwork and exertion and faintness, he slept on peacefully like a tired child, till at nine o'clock Mrs. Stannaway rapped hard at the door to rouse him. Then he woke with a start from a heavy sleep, his head aching, but drowsy still, and with feverish pains in all his limbs from his desperate swim and his long immersion. He was quite unfit to get up and dress; but he rose for all that, as if all was well, and even pretended to eat some breakfast, though a cup of tea was the only thing he could really gulp down his parched throat in his horror and excitement. Last night's events came clearly home to him now in their naked ghastliness, and with sinking heart and throbbing head, he realized the full extent of his guilt and his danger, the depth of his remorse, and the profundity of his folly.

Elsie was gone—that was his first thought.

There was no more an Elsie to reckon with in all this world. Her place was blank—how blank he could never before have truly realized. The whole world itself was blank too. What he loved best in it all was gone clean out of it.

Elsie, Elsie, poor drowned, lost Elsie! His heart ached as he thought to himself of Elsie, gasping and struggling in that cold, cold sea, among those fierce wild breakers, for one last breath—and knew it was he who had driven her, by his baseness and wickedness and cruelty, to that terrible end of a sweet young existence. He had darkened the sun in heaven for himself henceforth and for ever. He had sown the wind, and he should reap the whirlwind. He hated himself; he hated Winifred; he hated everybody and everything but Elsie. Poor martyred Elsie! Beautiful Elsie! His own sweet, exquisite, noble Elsie! He would have given the whole world at that moment to bring her back again. But the past was irrevocable, quite irrevocable. There was nothing for a strong man now to do but to brace himself up and face the present.

"If not, what resolution from despair?"— That was all the comfort his philosophy could give him.

Elsie's things were locked up in the cupboard. If suspicion lighted upon him in any way now, it was all up with him. Elsie's bag and jewel-case and clothing in the cupboard would alone be more than enough to hang him. Hang him! What did he care any longer for hanging? They might hang him and welcome, if they chose to try. For sixpence he would save them the trouble, and drown himself. He wanted to die. It was fate that prevented him. Why hadn't he drowned when he might, last night? An ugly proverb that, about the man who is born to be hanged, etc. Some of these proverbs are downright rude — positively vulgar in the coarse simplicity and directness of their language.

He gulped down the tea with a terrible effort: it was scalding hot, and it burnt his mouth, but he scarcely noticed it. Then he pulled about the sole on his fork for a moment, to dirty the plate, and boning it roughly, gave the flesh to the cat, who ate it

purring on the rug by the fireplace. He waited for a reasonable interval next before ringing the bell—it takes a lone man ten minutes to breakfast—but as soon as that necessary time had passed, he put on his hat, crushing it down on his head, and with fiery soul and bursting temples strolled up, with the jauntiest air he could assume, to the Meyseys' after breakfast.

Winifred met him at the front door. His new sweetheart was pale and terrified, but not now crying. Hugh felt himself constrained to presume upon their novel relations and insist upon a kiss—she would expect it of him. It was the very first time he had ever kissed her, and, oh evil omen, it revolted him at last that he had now to do it—with Elsie's body tossed about that very moment by the cruel waves upon that angry bar or on the cold sea-bottom. It was treason to Elsie—to poor dead Elsie—that he should ever kiss any other woman. His kisses were hers, his heart was hers, for ever and ever. But what would you have? He looked on, as he had said, as if from above, at circumstances wafting his own character and his

own actions hither and thither wherever they willed—and this was the pass to which they had now brought him. He must play out the game—play it out to the end, whatever it might cost him.

Winifred took the kiss mechanically and coldly, and handed him Elsie's letter—his own forged letter—without one word of preface or explanation. Hugh was glad she did so at the very first moment—it allowed him to relieve himself at once from the terrible strain of the affected gaiety he was keeping up just to save appearances. He couldn't have kept it up much longer. His countenance fell visibly as he read the note—or pretended to read it, for he had no need really to glance at its words—every word of them all now burnt into the very fibres and fabric of his being.

"Why, what does this mean, Miss Meysey—that is to say, Winifred?" he corrected himself hurriedly. "Elsie isn't gone? She's here this morning as usual, surely?"

As he said it he almost hoped it might be true. He could hardly believe the horrible, horrible reality. His face was pale enough

in all conscience now—a little too pale, perhaps, for the letter alone to justify. Winifred, eyeing him close, saw at a glance that he was deeply moved.

"She's gone," she said, not too tenderly either. "She went away last night, taking her things with her—at least some of them.—Do you know where she's gone, Mr. Massinger? Has she written to you, as she promises?"

"Not Mr. Massinger," Hugh corrected gravely, with a livid white face, yet affecting jauntiness. "It was agreed yesterday it should be 'Hugh' in future.—No, I don't at all know where she is, Winifred; I wish I did." He said it seriously. "She hasn't written a single line to me."

Hugh's answer had the very ring of truth in it—for indeed it was true; and Winifred, watching him with a woman's closeness, felt certain in her own mind that in this at least he was not deceiving her. But he certainly grew unnecessarily pale. Cousinly affection would hardly account for so much disturbance of the vaso-motor system. She questioned him closely as to all that had passed or might

have passed between them these weeks or earlier. Did he know anything of Elsie's movements or feelings? Hugh, holding the letter firmly in one hand, and playing with the key of that incriminating cupboard, in his waistcoat pocket, loosely with the other, passed with credit his examination. He had never, he said, with gay flippancy almost, been really intimate with Elsie, talked confidences with Elsie, or received any from Elsie in return. She did not know of his engagement to Winifred. Yet he feared, whatever her course might be, some man or other must be its leading motive. Perhaps—but this with the utmost hesitation—Warren Relf and she might have struck up a love affair.

He felt, of course, it was a serious ordeal. Apart from the profounder background of possible consequences—the obvious charge of having got rid of Elsie—two other unpleasant notions stared him full in the face. The first was, that the Meyseys might suspect him of having driven Elsie to run away by his proposal to Winifred. But supposing even they never thought of that—which was highly

unlikely, considering the close sequence of the two events and the evident drift of Winifred's questions—there still remained the second unpleasantness—that his cousin, through whom alone he had been introduced to the family, should have disappeared under such mysterious circumstances. Was it likely they would wish their daughter to marry a man among whose relations such odd and unaccountable things were likely to happen?

For, strangely enough, Hugh still wished to marry Winifred. Though he loathed her in his heart just then for not being Elsie, and even, by some illogical twist of thought, for having been the unconscious cause of Elsie's misfortunes; though he would have died himself far rather than lived without Elsie; yet, if he lived, he wished for all that to marry Winifred. For one thing, it was the programme; and because it was the programme, he wanted, with his strict business habits, to carry it out to the bitter end. For another thing, his future all depended upon it; and though he didn't care a straw at present for his future, he went on acting, by the pure force of habit in a prudent man, as

deliberately and cautiously as if he had still the same serious stake in existence as ever. He wasn't going to chuck up everything all at once, just because life was now an utter blank to him. He would go on as usual in the regular groove, and pretend to the world he was still every bit as interested and engaged in life as formerly.

So he brazened things out with the Meyseys somehow, and to his immense astonishment, he soon discovered they were ready dupes, in no way set against him by this untoward accident. On the contrary, instead of finding, as he had expected, that they considered this delinquency on the part of his cousin told against himself as a remote partner of her original sin, by right of heredity, he found the Squire and Mrs. Meysey nervously anxious for their part lest he, her nearest male relative, should suspect them of having inefficiently guarded his cousin's youth, inexperience, and innocence. They were all apology, where he had looked for coldness; they were all on the defensive, where he had expected to see them vigorously carrying the war into Africa. One thing, above all others, he noted with

profound satisfaction — nobody seemed to doubt for one second the genuineness and authenticity of the forged letter. Whatever else they doubted, the letter was safe. They all took it fully for granted that Elsie had gone, of her own free-will, gone to the four winds, with no trace left of her; and that Hugh, in the perfect innocence of his heart, knew no more than they themselves about it.

Nothing else, of course, was talked of at Whitestrand that livelong day; and before night, the gossips and quidnuncs of the village inn and the servants' hall had a complete theory of their own to account for the episode. Their theory was simple, romantic, and improbable. It had the dearly-loved spice of mystery about it. The coastguard had noticed that a ship, name unknown, with a red light at the masthead and a green on the port bow, had put in hastily about nine o'clock the night before, near the big poplar. The Whitestrand cronies had magnified this fact before nightfall, through various additions of more or less fanciful observers or non-observers—for fiction, too, counts for something—into a consistent story of a most

orthodox elopement. Miss Elsie had let herself down by a twisted sheet out of her own window, to escape observation—some said a rope, but the majority voted for the twisted sheet, as more strictly in accordance with established precedent—she had slipped away to the big tree, where a gentleman's yacht, from parts unknown, had put in cautiously, before a terrible gale, by previous arrangement, and had carried her over through a roaring sea across to the opposite coast of Flanders. Detail after detail grew apace; and before long there were some who even admitted to having actually seen a foreign-looking gentleman in a dark cloak—the cloak is a valuable romantic property upon such occasions—catch a white-robed lady in his stout arms as she leaped a wild leap into an open boat from the spray-covered platform of the gnarled poplar roots. Hugh smiled a grim and hideous smile of polite incredulity as he listened to these final imaginative embellishments of the popular fancy; but he accepted in outline the romantic tale as the best possible version of Elsie's disappearance for public acceptance. It kept

the police at least from poking their noses too deep into this family affair, and it freed him from any possible tinge of blame in the eyes of the Meyseys. Nobody can be found fault with for somebody else's elopement. Two points at least seemed fairly certain to the Whitestrand intelligence: first, that Miss Eslie had run away of her own accord, in the absence of the family; and second, that she neither went by road nor rail, so that only the sea or river appeared to be left by way of a possible explanation.

The Meyseys, of course, were less credulous as to detail; but even the Meyseys suspected nothing serious in the matter. That Elsie had gone was all they knew; why she went, was a profound mystery to them.

CHAPTER XIV.

LIVE OR DIE?

And all this time, what had become of Elsie and the men in the *Mud-Turtle?*

Hugh Massinger, for his part, took it for granted, from the moment he came to himself again on the bank of the salt marshes, that Elsie's body was lying unseen full fathoms five beneath the German Ocean, and that no tangible evidence of his crime and his deceit would ever be forthcoming to prove the naked truth in all its native ugliness against him. From time to time, to be sure, one disquieting thought for a moment occurred to his uneasy mind: a back-current might perhaps cast up the corpse upon the long dike where he had himself been stranded, or the breakers on the bar might fling it ashore upon the great sands that stretched for miles on either side of the

river-mouth at Whitestrand. But to these terrible imaginings of the night-watches, the more judicial functions of his waking brain refused their assent on closer consideration. He himself had floated through that seething turmoil simply because he knew how to float. A woman, caught wildly by the careering current in its headlong course, would naturally give a few mad struggles for life, gasping and gulping and flinging up her hands, as those untaught to swim invariably do; but when once the stream had carried her under, she would never rise again from so profound and measureless a depth of water. He did not in any way doubt that the body had been swept away seaward with irresistible might by the first force of the outward flow, and that it now lay huddled at the bottom of the German Ocean in some deep pool, whence dredge or diver could never by human means recover it.

How differently would he have thought and acted all along had he only known that Warren Relf and his companion on the *Mud-Turtle* had found Elsie's body floating on the surface, a limp burden, not half an hour after its first immersion.

That damning fact rendered all his bold precautions and daring plans for the future worse than useless. As things really stood, he was plotting and scheming for his own condemnation. Through the mere accident that Elsie's body had been recovered, he was heaping up suspicious circumstantial evidence against himself by the forged letter, by the night escapade, by the wild design of entering Elsie's bedroom at the Hall, by the mad idea of concealing at his own lodgings her purloined clothes and jewelry and belongings. If ever an inquiry should come to be raised into the way that Elsie met her death, the very cunning with which Hugh had fabricated a false scent would recoil in the end most sternly against himself. The spoor that he scattered would come home to track him. Could any one believe that an innocent man would so carefully surround himself with an enveloping atmosphere of suspicious circumstances out of pure wantonness?

And yet, technically speaking, Hugh was in reality quite innocent. Murderer as he felt himself, he had done no murder. Morally guilty though he might be of the causes

which led to Elsie's death, there was nothing of legal or formal crime to object against him in any court of so-called justice. Every man has a right to marry whom he will; and if a young woman with whom he has cautiously and scrupulously avoided contracting any definite engagement, chooses to consider herself aggrieved by his conduct, and to go incontinently, whether by accident or design, and drown herself in chagrin and despair and misery, why, that is clearly no fault of his, however much she may regard herself as injured by him. The law has nothing to do with sentiment. Judges quote no precedent from Shelley or Tennyson. If Hugh had told the whole truth, he would at least have been free from legal blame. By his extraordinary precautions against possible doubts, he had only succeeded in making himself seem guilty in the eyes even of the unromantic lawyers.

When Warren Relf drew Elsie Challoner, a huddled mass, on board the *Mud-Turtle*, the surf was rolling so high on the bar that, with one accord, he and Potts decided together it would be impossible for them, against such a

sea, to run up the tidal mouth to Whitestrand. Their piteous little dot of a craft could never face it. Wind had veered to the south-east. The only way possible now was to head her round again, and make before the shifting breeze for Lowestoft, the nearest northward harbour of refuge.

It was an awful moment. The sea roared onward through the black night; the cross-drift whirled and wreathed and eddied; the blinding foam lashed itself in volleys through the dusk and gloom against their quivering broadside. And those two men, nothing daunted, drove the *Mud-Turtle* once more across the flank of the wind, and fronted her bows in a direct line for the port of Lowestoft, in spite of wind and sea and tempest.

But how were they to manage meanwhile, in that tossing cockleshell of a boat, about the lady they had scarcely rescued? That Elsie was drowned, Warren Relf didn't for a moment doubt; still, in every case of apparent drowning, it is a duty to make sure life is really extinct before one gives up all hope; and that duty was a difficult one indeed to perform on board a tiny yawl, pitching

and rolling before a violent gale, and manned against the manifold dangers of the sea by exactly two amateur sailors. But there was no help for it. The ship must drift with one mariner only. Potts did his best for the moment to navigate the dancing little yawl alone, now that they let her scud before the full force of the favouring wind under little canvas; while Warren Relf, staggering and steadying himself in the cabin below, rolled the body round in rugs and blankets, and tried his utmost to pour a few drops of brandy down the pale lips of the beautiful girl who lay listless and apparently lifeless before him.

It was to him indeed a terrible task; for from the first moment when the painter set eyes on Elsie Challoner, he had felt some nameless charm about her face and manner, some tender cadence in her musical voice, that affected him as no other face and no other voice had ever affected him or could ever affect him. He was not exactly in love with Elsie —love with him was a plant of slower growth —but he was fascinated, impressed, interested, charmed by her. And to sit there alone in that tossing cabin, with Elsie cold and stiff on

the berth before him, was to him more utterly painful and unmanning than he could ever have imagined a week or two earlier.

He did not doubt one instant the true story of the case. He felt instinctively in his heart that Hugh Massinger had shown her his inmost nature, and that this was the final and horrible result of Hugh's airy easy protestations.

As he sat there, watching by the light of the one oil lamp, and rubbing her hands and arms gently with his rough hard palms, he saw a sudden tumultuous movement of Elsie's bosom, a sort of gasp that convulsed her lungs—a deep inspiration, with a gurgling noise; and then, like a flash, it was borne in upon him suddenly that all was not over—that Elsie might yet be saved—that she was still living.

It was a terrible hour, a terrible position. If only they had had one more hand on board, one more person to help him with the task of recovering her! But how could he ever hope to revive that fainting girl, alone and unaided, while the ship drifted on, single-handed, tossing and plunging before that

stiffening breeze? He almost despaired of being able to effect anything. Yet life is life, and he would nerve himself up for it. He would try his best, and thank heaven this boisterous wind that roared through the rigging would carry them quick and safe to Lowestoft.

His mother and sister were still there. If once he could get Miss Challoner safe to land, they might even now hope to recover her. Where there's life, there's hope. But what hope in the dimly lighted cabin of a toy yawl, just fit for two hardy weather-beaten men to rough it hardly in, and pitching with wild plunges before as fierce a gale as ever ploughed the yeasty surface of the German Ocean?

He rushed to the companion-ladder as well as he was able, steadying himself on his sea-legs by the rail as he went, and shouted aloud in breathless excitement: "Potts, she's alive! she's not drowned! Can you manage the ship anyhow still, while I try my best to bring her round again?"

Potts answered back with a cheery: "All right. There's nothing much to do but to

let her run. She's out of our hands, for good or evil. The admiral of the fleet could do no more for her. If we're swamped, we're swamped; and if we're not, we're running clear for Lowestoft harbour. Give her sea-room enough, and she'll go anywhere. The storm don't live that'll founder the *Mud-Turtle.* I'll land you or drown you, but anyhow I'll manage her."

With that manful assurance satisfying his soul, Warren Relf turned back, his heart on fire, to the narrow cabin and flung himself once more on his knees before Elsie.

A more terrible night was seldom remembered by the oldest sailors on the North Sea. Smacks were wrecked and colliers foundered, and a British gunboat, manned by the usual complement of scientific officers, dashed herself full tilt in mad fury against the very base of a first-class lighthouse; but the taut little *Mud-Turtle,* true to her reputation as the staunchest craft that sailed the British channels, rode it bravely out, and battled her way triumphantly, about one in the morning, through the big waves that rolled up the mouth of Lowestoft harbour. Potts had

navigated her single-handed amid storm and breakers, and Warren Relf, in the cabin below, had almost succeeded in making Elsie Challoner open her eyes again.

But as soon as the excitement of that wild race for life was fairly over, and the *Mud-Turtle* lay in calm water once more, with perfect safety, the embarrassing nature of the situation, from the conventional point of view, burst suddenly for the first time upon Warren Relf's astonished vision; and he began to reflect that for two young men to arrive in port about the small hours of the morning, with a young lady very imperfectly known to either of them, lying in a dead faint on their cabin bunk, was, to say the least of it, a fact open to social and even to judicial misconstruction. It's all very well to say offhand, you picked the lady up in the German Ocean; but Society is apt to move the previous question, how did she get there? Still, something must be done with the uncovenanted passenger. There was nothing for it, Warren Relf felt, even at that late season of the night, but to carry the half-inanimate patient up to his mother's lodgings,

and to send for a doctor to bring her round at the earliest possible opportunity.

When Elsie was aware of herself once more, it was broad daylight; and she lay on a bed in a strange room, dimly conscious that two women whom she did not know were bending tenderly and lovingly over her. The elder, seen through a haze of half-closed eyelashes, was a sweet old lady with snow-white hair, and a gentle motherly expression in her soft gray eyes: one of the few women who know how to age graciously—

> "Whose fair old faces grow more fair
> As Point and Flanders yellow."

The younger was a girl about Elsie's own time of life, who looked as sisterly as the other looked motherly; a pleasant-faced girl, not exactly pretty, but with a clear brown skin, a cheek like the sunny side of peaches, and a smile that showed a faultless row of teeth within, besides lighting up and irradiating the whole countenance with a charming sense of kindliness and girlish innocence. In a single word it was a winning face. Elsie lay with her eyes half open, looking up at the face through her crossed eyelashes, for

many minutes, not realizing in any way her present position, but conscious only, in a dimly pleased and dreamy fashion, that the face seemed to soothe and comfort and console her.

Soothe and comfort and console her for what? She hardly knew. Some deep-seated pain in her inner nature—some hurt she had had in her tenderest feelings—a horrible aching blank and void.—She remembered now that something unspeakable and incredible had happened.—The sun had grown suddenly dark in heaven.—She had been sitting by the waterside with dear Hugh—as she thought of the name, that idolized name, a smile played for a moment faintly round the corners of her mouth; and the older lady, still seen half unconsciously through the chink in the eyelids, whispered in an audible tone to the younger and nearer one: "She's coming round, Edie. She's waking now. I hope, poor dear, she won't be dreadfully frightened, when she sees only two strangers by the bed beside her."

"Frightened at you, mother," the other voice answered, soft and low, as in a pleasant

dream. "Why, nobody on earth could ever be anything but delighted to wake up anywhere and find you, with your dear sweet old face, sitting by their bedside."

Elsie, still peering with half her pupils only through the closed lids, smiled to herself once more at the gentle murmur of those pleasant voices, both of them tender and womanly and musical, and went on to herself placidly with her own imaginings.

——Sitting by the waterside with her dear Hugh—dear, dear Hugh—that prince of men. How handsome he was; and how clever, and how generous! And Hugh had begun to tell her something. Eh! but something! What was it? What was it? She couldn't remember; she only knew it was something terrible, something disastrous, something unutterable, something killing. And then she rushed away from him, mad with terror, towards the big tree, and——

Ah!

It was an awful, heart-broken, heart-rending cry. Coming to herself suddenly, as the whole truth flashed like lightning once more across her bewildered brain, the poor girl

flung up her arms, raised herself wildly erect in the bed, and stared around her with a horrible vacant, maddened look, as if all her life were cut at once from under her. Both of the strangers recognized instinctively what that look meant. It was the look and the cry of a crushed life. If ever they had harboured a single thought of blame against that poor wounded, bleeding, torn heart for what seemed like a hasty attempt at self-murder, it was dissipated in a moment by that terrible voice—the voice of a goaded, distracted, irresponsible creature from whom all consciousness or thought of right and wrong, of life and death, of sense and movement, of motive and consequence, has been stunned at one blow by some deadly act of undeserved cruelty and unexpected wickedness.

The tears ran unchecked in silent sympathy down the women's flushed cheeks.

Mrs. Relf leant over and caught her in her arms. "My poor child," she whispered, laying Elsie's head with motherly tenderness on her own soft shoulder, and soothing the girl's pallid white face with her gentle old hand, "cry, cry, cry if you can! Don't hold

back your tears; let them run, darling. It'll do you good.—Cry, cry, my child—we're all friends here. Don't be afraid of us."

Elsie never knew, in the agony of the moment, where she was or how she came there; but nestling her head on Mrs. Relf's shoulder, and fain of the sympathy that gentle soul extended her so easily, she gave free vent to her pent-up passion, and let her bosom sob itself out in great bursts and throbs of choking grief; while the two women, who had never till that very morning seen her fair face, cried and sobbed silently in mute concert by her side for many, many minutes together.

"Have you no mother, dear?" Mrs. Relf whispered through her tears at last; and Elsie, finding her voice with difficulty, murmured back in a choked and blinded tone: "I never knew my mother."

"Then Edie and I will be mother and sister to you," the beautiful old lady answered with a soft caress. "You mustn't talk any more now. The doctor would be very, very angry with me for letting you talk and cry even this little bit. But crying's good for

one when one's heart's sore. I know, my child, yours is sore now. When you're a great deal better, you'll tell us all about it.—Edie, some more beef-tea and brandy.—We've been feeding you with it all night, dear, with a wet feather.—You can drink a little, I hope, now. You must take a good drink and lie back quietly."

Elsie smiled a faint sad smile. The world was all lost and gone for her now; but still she liked these dear souls' sweet quiet sympathy. As Edie glided across the room noiselessly to fetch the cup, and brought it over and held it to her lips and made her drink, Elsie's eyes followed every motion gratefully.

"Who are you?" she cried, clutching her new friend's plump soft hand eagerly. "Tell me where I am. Who brought me here? How did I get here?"

"I'm Edie Relf," the girl answered in the same low silvery voice as before, stooping down and kissing her. "You know my brother, Warren Relf, the artist whom you met at Whitestrand. You've had an accident—you fell into the water—from the shore at Whitestrand. And Warren, who was cruising

about in his yawl, picked you up and brought you ashore here. You're at Lowestoft now. Mamma and I are here in lodgings. Nobody at Whitestrand knows anything about it yet, we believe.—But darling," and she held poor Elsie's hand tight at this, and whispered very low and close in her ear, "we think we guess all the rest too. We think we know how it all happened.—Don't be afraid of us. You may tell it all to us by-and-by, when you're quite strong enough. Mother and I will do all we can to make you better. We know we can never make you forget it."

Elsie's head sank back on the pillow. It was all terrible—terrible—terrible. But one thought possessed her whole nature now. Hugh must think she was really drowned: that would grieve Hugh—dear affectionate Hugh.—He might be cruel enough to cast her off as he had done—though she couldn't believe it—it must surely be a hideous, hideous dream, from which sooner or later she would be certain to have a happy awakening—but at any rate it must have driven him wild with grief and remorse and horror to think he had killed her—to think she was

lost to him.—Oughtn't she to telegraph at once to Hugh—to dear, dear Hugh—and tell him at least she was saved, she was still living?

CHAPTER XV.

THE PLAN EXTENDS ITSELF.

For three or four days, Elsie lay at the Relfs' lodgings at Lowestoft, seriously ill, but slowly improving; and all the time, Mrs. Relf and Edie watched over her tenderly with unceasing solicitude, as though she had been their own daughter and sister. Elsie's heart was torn every moment by a devouring desire to know what Hugh had done, what Hugh was doing, what they had all said and thought about her at Whitestrand. She never said so directly to the Relfs, of course; she couldn't bring herself yet to speak of it to anybody; but Edie perceived it intuitively from her silence and her words; and after a time, she mentioned the matter in sisterly confidence to her brother Warren. They had both looked in the local papers for some account of

the accident—if accident it were—and saw, to their surprise, that no note was taken anywhere of Elsie's sudden disappearance.

This was curious, not to say ominous; for in most English country villages a young lady cannot vanish into space on a summer evening, especially by flinging herself bodily into the sea—as Warren Relf did not doubt for a second Elsie had done in the momentary desperation of a terrible awakening—without exciting some sort of local curiosity as to where she has gone or what has become of the body. We cannot emulate the calm social atmosphere of the Bagdad of the Califs, where a mysterious disappearance on an enchanted carpet aroused but the faintest and most languid passing interest in the breasts of the bystanders. With us, the enchanted carpet explanation has fallen out of date, and mysterious disappearances, however remarkable, form a subject rather of prosaic and prying inquiry on the part of those commonplace and unromantic myrmidons, the county constabulary.

So the strange absence of any allusion in the Whitestrand news to what must needs

have formed a nine days' wonder in the quiet little village, quickened all Warren Relf's profoundest suspicions as to Hugh's procedure. At Whitestrand, all they could possibly know was that Miss Challoner was missing—perhaps even that Miss Challoner had drowned herself. Why should it all be so unaccountably burked, so strangely hushed up in the local newspapers? Why should no report be divulged anywhere? Why should nobody even hint in the *Lowestoft Times* or the *Ipswich Chronicle* that a young lady, of considerable personal attractions, was unaccountably missing from the family of a well-known Suffolk landowner?

Already on the very day after his return to Lowestoft, Warren Relf had hastily telegraphed to Hugh Massinger at Whitestrand that he was detained in the Broads, and would be unable to carry out his long-standing engagement to take him round in the *Mud-Turtle* to London. But as time went on, and no news came from Massinger, Warren Relf's suspicions deepened daily. It was clear that Elsie, too, was lingering in her convalescence from suspense and uncertainty. She couldn't

make up her mind to write either to Hugh or Winifred, and yet she couldn't bear the long state of doubt which silence entailed upon her. So at last, to set to rest their joint fears, and to make sure what was really being said and done and thought at Whitestrand, Warren Relf determined to run over quietly for an afternoon's inquiry, and to hear with his own ears how people were talking about the topic of the hour in the little village.

He never got there, however. At Almundham Station, to his great surprise, he ran suddenly against Mr. Wyville Meysey. The Squire recognized him at a glance as the young man who had taken them in his yawl to the sandhills, and began to talk to him freely at once about all that had since happened in the family. But Relf was even more astonished when he found that the subject which lay uppermost in Mr. Meysey's mind just then was not Elsie Challoner's mysterious disappearance at all, but his daughter Winifred's recent engagement to Hugh Massinger. The painter was still some years too young to have mastered the pro-

found anthropological truth that, even with the best of us, man is always a self-centred being.

"Well, yes," the Squire said, after a few commonplaces of conversation had been interchanged between them. "You haven't heard, then, from your friend Massinger lately, haven't you? I'm surprised at that. He had something out of the common to communicate. I should have thought he'd have been anxious to let you know at once that he and my girl Winifred had hit things off amicably together.—Oh yes, it's announced, definitely announced: Society is aware of it. Mrs. Meysey made it known to the county, so to speak, at Sir Theodore Sheepshanks's on Wednesday evening. Your friend Massinger is not perhaps quite the precise man we might have selected ourselves for Winifred, if we'd taken the choice into our own hands; but what I say is, let the young people settle these things themselves—let the young people settle them between them. It's they who've got to live with one another, after all, not we; and they're a great deal more interested in it at bottom, when one comes to think of

it, than the whole of the rest of us put together."

"And Miss Challoner?" Warren asked, as soon as he could edge in a word conveniently, after the Squire had dealt from many points of view — all equally prosy — with Hugh Massinger's position, character, and prospects —"is she still with you? I'm greatly interested in her. She made an immense impression on me that day in the sandhills."

The Squire's face fell somewhat. "Miss Challoner?" he echoed. "Ah, yes; our governess. Well, to tell you the truth—if you ask me point-blank—Miss Challoner's gone off a little suddenly.—We've been disappointed in that girl, if you *will* have it. We don't want it talked about in the neighbourhood more than we can help, on Hugh Massinger's account, more than anything else, because, after all, she was a sort of a cousin of his—a sort of a cousin, though a very remote one; as we learn now, an extremely remote one. We've asked the servants to hush it all up as much as they can, to prevent gossip; for my daughter's sake, we'd like to avoid gossip; but I don't mind telling you, in

strict confidence, as you're a friend of Massinger's, that Miss Challoner left us, we all think, in a most unkind and ungrateful manner. It fell upon us like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. She wrote a letter to Winifred the day before to say she was leaving for parts unknown, without grounds stated. She slipped away, like a thief in the night, as the proverb says, taking just a small handbag with her, one dark evening; and the only other communication we've since received is a telegram from London—sent to Hugh Massinger—asking us, in the most mysterious, romantic school-girlish style, to forward her luggage and belongings to an address given."

"A telegram from London!" Warren Relf cried in blank surprise. "Do you think Miss Challoner's in London, then? That's very remarkable.—A telegram to Massinger! asking you to send her luggage on to London!—You're quite sure it came from London, are you?"

"Quite sure!—Why, I've got it in my pocket this very moment, my dear sir," the Squire replied somewhat testily. (When an elder man says "My dear sir," to a very much

younger one, you may take it for granted he always means to mark his strong disapprobation of the particular turn the talk has taken.) "Here it is—look: 'To Hugh Massinger, Fisherman's Rest, Whitestrand, Suffolk.—Ask Winifred to send the rest of my luggage and property to 27, Holmbury Place, Duke Street, St. James's. Explanations by post hereafter. —Elsie Challoner.'—And here's the letter she wrote to Winifred: a very disappointing, disheartening letter. I'd like you to read it, as you seem interested in the girl. It's an immense mistake ever to be interested in anybody anywhere! A very bad lot, after all, I'm afraid; though she's clever, of course, undeniably clever.—We had her with the best credentials, too, from Girton. We're only too thankful now to think she should have associated for so very short a time with my daughter Winifred."

Warren Relf took the letter and telegram from the Squire's hand in speechless astonishment. This was evidently a plot—a dark and extraordinary plot of Massinger's. Just at first he could hardly unravel its curious intricacies. He knew the address in Holm-

bury Place well; it was where the club porter of the Cheyne Row lived. But he read the letter with utter bewilderment. Then the whole truth dawned piecemeal upon his astonished mind as he read it over and over slowly. It was all a lie—a hideous, hateful lie. Hugh Massinger believed that Elsie was drowned. He had forged the letter to Winifred to cover the truth, and, incredible as it seemed to a straightforward, honest nature like Warren Relfs, he had managed to get the telegram sent from London by some other person, in Elsie's name, and to have Elsie's belongings forwarded direct to the club porter's, as if at her own request, by Miss Meysey. Warren Relf stood aghast with horror at this unexpected revelation of Massinger's utter baseness and extraordinary cunning. He had suspected the man of heartlessness and levity; he had never suspected him of anything like so profound a capacity for serious crime—for forgery and theft and concealment of evidence.

His fingers trembled as he held and examined the two documents. At all hazards, he must show them to Miss Challoner. It

was right she should know herself for exactly what manner of man she had thrown herself away. He hesitated a moment, then he said boldly, "These papers are very important to me, as casting light on the whole matter. I'm an acquaintance of Massinger's, and I'm deeply interested in the young lady. It's highly desirable she should be traced and looked after. I have some reason to suspect where she is at present. I want to ask a favour of you now. Will you lend me these documents, for three days only, and will you kindly mention to nobody at present the fact of your having seen me or spoken to me here this morning?" To gain time at least was always something.

The Squire was somewhat taken aback at first by this unexpected request; but Warren Relf looked so honest and true as he asked it, that, after a few words of hesitation and explanation, the Squire, convinced of his friendly intentions, acceded to both his propositions at once. It flashed across his mind as a possible solution that the painter had been pestering Elsie with too pressing attentions, and that Elsie, with hysterical girlish haste, had run

away from him to escape them—or perhaps only to make him follow her. Anyhow, there would be no great harm in his tracking her down. "If the girl's in trouble, and you think you can help her," he said good-naturedly, "I don't mind giving you what assistance I can in this matter. You can have the papers. Send them back next week or the week after. I'm going to Scotland for a fortnight's shooting now—at Farquharson's of Invertanar—and I shan't be back till the tenth or eleventh. But I'm glad somebody has some idea where the girl is. As it seems to be confidential, I'll ask no questions at present about her; but I do hope she hasn't got into any serious mischief."

"She has got into no mischief at all of any sort," Warren Relf answered slowly and seriously. "You are evidently labouring under a complete misapprehension, Mr. Meysey, as to her reasons for leaving you. I have no doubt that mispprehension will be cleared up in time. Miss Challoner's motives, I can assure you, were perfectly right and proper; only the action of another person has led you to mistake her conduct in the matter."

This was mysterious, and the Squire hated mystery; but after all, it favoured his theory—and besides, the matter was to him a relatively unimportant one. It didn't concern his own private interest. He merely suspected Warren Relf of having got himself mixed up in some foolish love-affair with Elsie Challoner, his daughter's governess, and he vaguely conceived that one or other of them had taken a very remarkable and romantic way of wriggling out of it. Moreover, at that precise moment his train came in; and since time and train wait for no man, the Squire, with a hasty farewell to the young painter, installed himself forthwith on the comfortable cushions of a first-class carriage, and steamed unconcernedly out of Almundham Station.

It was useless for Warren Relf now to go on to Whitestrand. To show himself there would be merely to display his hand openly before Hugh Massinger. The caprice of circumstances had settled everything for him exactly as he would have wished it. It was lucky indeed that the Squire would be away for a whole fortnight; his absence would give

them time to concert a connected plan of action, and to devise means for protecting Elsie. For to Warren Relf that was now the one great problem in the case—how to hush the whole matter up, without exposing Elsie's wounded heart to daws and jays—without making her the matter of unnecessary suspicion, or the subject of common gossip and censorious chatter. At all costs, it must never be said that Miss Challoner had tried to drown herself in spite and jealousy at Whitestrand poplar, because Hugh Massinger had ventured to propose to Winifred Meysey.

That was how the daws and jays would put it, after their odious kind, over five o'clock tea, in their demure drawing-rooms.

What Elsie herself would say to it all, or think of doing in these difficult circumstances, Warren Relf did not in the least know. As yet, he was only very imperfectly informed as to the real state of the case in all its minor details. But he knew this much—that he must screen Elsie at all hazards from the slanderous tongues of five o'clock tea-tables, and that the story must be kept as quiet as

possible, safeguarded by himself, his mother, and his sister.

So he took the next train back to Lowestoft, to consult at leisure on these new proofs of Hugh Massinger's guilt with his domestic counsellors.

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM INFORMATION RECEIVED.

At Whitestrand itself, that same afternoon, Hugh Massinger sat in his own little parlour at the village inn, feverish and eager, as he had always been since that terrible night when "Elsie was drowned," as he firmly believed without doubt or question; and in the bar across the passage, a couple of new-comers, rough waterside characters, were talking loudly in the seafaring tongue about some matter of their own over a pint of beer and a pipe of tobacco. Hugh tried in vain for many minutes to interest himself in the concluding verses of his "Death of Alaric"—anything for an escape from this gnawing remorse—but his Hippocrene was dry, his Pegasus refused to budge a feather: he could find no rhymes and grind out no sentiments;

till, angry with himself at last for his own unproductiveness, he leant back in his chair with profound annoyance and listened listlessly to the strange disjointed echoes of gossip that came to him in fragments through the half-open door from the adjoining taproom. To his immense surprise, the talk was not now of topsails or of spinnakers: conversation seemed to have taken a literary turn; he caught more than once through a haze of words the unexpected names of Charles Dickens and Rogue Riderhood.

The oddity of their occurrence in such company made him prick up his ears. He strained his hearing to catch the context.

"Yis," the voice was drawling out, in very pure Suffolk, just tinged with the more Metropolitan Wapping accent; "I read that there book, 'Our Mutual Friend,' I think he call it. A mate o' mine, he say to me one day, 'Bill,' he say, 'he ha' bin a-takin yow off, bor. He ha' showed yow up in print under the naame o' Roogue Ridenhood,' he say, 'and yow owt to read it, if oonly for the likeness. Blow me if he heen't got you what ye call proper.' 'Yow don't mean that?' I say, 'cos I thowt

he was a-jookin', ye know. 'I dew, though,' he answer, 'and yow must look into it.' Well, I got howd o' the book, an' I read it right throu: leastways, my missus, she read it out loud to me: she ha' got more larnin' than me, ye know: and the whool lot is what I call a bargain o' squit. It's noo more like me than chalk's like cheese."

"The cap doon't fare to fit yow, then?" the other voice retorted with a gurgle of tobacco. "He heen't drew yow soo any one would know who it is?"

"Know me? I should think not. What he say 's a parcel of rubbidge. This here Roogue Ridenhood, accordin' to the tale, ye see, he used to row about Limehouse Reach, a-searchin' for bodies."

"Searchin' for bodies!" the second man repeated with an incredulous whiff. "Why, what the deuce and turfy did he want to do that for?"

"Well, that's jest where it is, doon't ye see? He done it for a livin'. 'For a livin',' I say, when my missus up an' read that part out to me; 'why, what manner o' livin' could a poor beggar make out o' that?' I say. 'It

een't as though a body was wuth anything nowadays, *as* a body,' I say, argifyin' like. 'A man what knew anything about the riverside wouldn't a wroot such rubbidge as that an' put it into a printed book, what ought to be ackerate. My belief is,' I say, 'that that there Dickens is an ooverrated man. In fact, the man's a fule. A body nowadays, whether it be a drownded body or a nat'ral one, een't wuth nothin', not the clothes it stand upright in, *as* a body,' I put it. 'Times goon by,' I say to har, 'a body was actshally a body, an' wuth savin' for itself, afore body-snatchin' was done away wooth by that there 'Natomy Ack. But what is it now? Wuth half a crown for landin' it, paid by the parish, if it's landed in Essex, or five bob if yow tow it oover Surrey side of river. Not but what I grant yow there's bodies an' bodies. If a nob drownd hisself, why then in course there's sometimes as much as fifty pound, or maybe a hundred, set on the body. His friends are glad to get the corpse back, an' prove his death, an' hev it buried reg'lar in the family churchyard. Saves a deal in lawyer's expenses, that do.

I doon't deny but what they offer free enough for a nob. But how many nobs goo and drownd theirselves in a season do yow suppose? And who that knew anything about the river would goo a-lookin' for nobs in Limehouse Reach or down about Bermondsey way?"

"It stand to reason they woon't, Bill," the other voice answered with a quiet chuckle.

"In course it stand to reason," Bill replied warmly with an emphatic expletive. "When a nob drownd hisself, he doon't hull hisself off London Bridge; no nor off Blackfriars' nather, I warrant ye. He doon't put hisself out aforehand for nothin' like that, takin' a 'bus into the City out o' pure fulishness. He jest clap his hat on his hid an' stroll down to Westminister Bridge, or to Charen Cross or Waterloo—a lot on 'em goo oover Waterloo, pleece or no pleece; an' he jump in cloose an' handy to his own door, in a way of speakin', and a done wooth it. But what's the use of lookin' for him arter that below Bridge, down Limehouse way? Anybody what know the river know well enough that a body startin' from Waterloo, or maybe from West-

minister, doon't goo down to Limehouse, ebb or flow, nor nothing like it. It get into the whirlpool off Saunders's wharf, an' ketch the back current, and turn round and round till it's flung up by the tide, as yow may say, upward, on the mud at Milbank, or by Lambeth Stangate. Soo there een't a livin' to be made anyhow by pickin' up bodies down about Limehouse; an' it's allus been my opinion ever since then that that there Dickens is a very much ooverrated pusson."

"There een't the least doubt about that," the other answered. "If he said soo, yow can't be far wrong there nather."

To Hugh Massinger, sitting apart in his own room, these strange scraps of an alien conversation had just then a ghastly and horrible fascination. These men were accustomed, then, to drowned corpses! They were connoisseurs in drowning. They knew the ways of bodies like regular experts. He listened, spellbound, to catch their next sentences. There was a short pause, during which—as he judged by the way they breathed—each took a long pull at the pewter mug, and then the last speaker began again.

"Yow owt to know," he murmured musingly, "for I s'pose there een't any man on the river anywhere what a had to do wooth as many bodies as yow hev."

"Yow're right, bor," the first person assented emphatically. "Thutty year I ha' sarved the Trinity House, sunshine or rain, an' yow doon't pervision lightships that long woothout larnin' a thing or two on the way about corpsus. The current carry 'em all one way round. A body what start on its jarney at Westminister, as it may be here, goo ashore at Milbank. A body which begin at London Bridge, come out, as reg'lar as clockwuck, on the fudder ind o' the Isle o' Dogs.—It's jest the same along this here east coost. I picked up that gal I ha' come about to-day on the north side o' the Orfordness Light, by the back o' the Trinity groyne or cloose by. A body which come up on the north side of Orfordness has allus drifted down from the nor'west'ard. Soo it stand to reason this here gal I ha' got layin' up there in the deadhouse must ha' come wooth the ebb from Walzerwig or Aldeburgh or maybe Whitestrand. There een't another way out of it

anyhow. Well, they towd me at Walzerwig there was a young lady missin' oover here at Whitestrand—a young lady from the Hall —a nob niver doubt: an' as there might be money in it, or agin there mightn't, why, in course, I come up here to make all proper enquiries."

Hugh Massinger's heart gave a terrible bound. Oh, heavens! that things should have come to this pass. That wretch had found Elsie's body!

In what a tangled maze of impossibilities had he enmeshed himself for ever by that one false step of the forged letter. This wretch had found Elsie's body—the body that he loved with all his soul—and he could neither claim it himself nor look upon it, bury it nor show the faintest interest in it, without involving his case still further in endless complications, and rousing suspicions of fatal import against his own character.

He waited breathless for the next sentence. The second speaker went on once more. "And it doon't fit?" he suggested, inquiringly.

"No, it doon't fit, drot it," the man called Bill answered in an impatient tone. "She

een't drownded at all, wuss luck, the young lady what's missin' from the Hall. They ha' had letters an' talegraphs from har, dated later'n the day I found har. I ha' handed oover the body to the county pleece; it's in the dead-house at the Low Light: an' I shan't hev noo more than half a crown from the parish arter all for all my trouble. Suffolk an' Essex are half a crown counties: Surrey's more liberal; it goo to five bob on 'em. Why, I'm more'n eight shillins out o' pocket by that there gal a'ready, what wooth loss o' time an' travellin' expenses an' soo on. Next time I ketch a body knockin' about on a lee shore, wooth the tide runnin, an' the breakers poundin' it on its face on the shingle, they may whistle for it theirselves, that's what they may doo: I een't a-gooin' to trouble my hid about it. Make a livin' out on it, indeed! Why, it's all rubbidge, nothin' more or less. It's my opinion that there Dickens is a very much ooverrated pusson."

Hugh Massinger rose slowly, like one stunned, walked across the room, as in a dream, to the door, closed it noiselessly, for he could contain himself no longer, and then,

burying his face silently in his arms, cried to himself a long and bitter cry, the tears following one another hot and fast down his burning cheeks, while his throat was choked by a rising ball that seemed to check his breath and impede the utterance of his stifled sobs. Elsie was dead, dead for him as if he had actually seen her drowned body cast up, unknown, as the man so hideously and graphically described it in his callous brutality, upon the long spit of the Orfordness lighthouse. He didn't for one moment doubt that it was she indeed whom the fellow had found and placed in the mortuary. His own lie reacted fatally against himself. He had put others on a false track, and now the false track misled his own spirit. From that day forth, Elsie was indeed dead, dead, dead for him. Alive in reality, and for all else save him, she was dead for him as though he had seen her buried. And yet, most terrible irony of all, he must still pretend before all the world strenuously and ceaselessly to believe her living. He must never in a single forgetful moment display his grief and remorse for the past; his sorrow for the loss of the

one woman he had really loved—and basely betrayed; his profound affection for her now she was gone and lost to him for ever. He dare not even inquire—for the present at least—where she would be laid, or what would be done with her poor dishonoured and neglected corpse. It must be buried, unheeded, in a pauper's nameless grave, by creatures as base and cruel as the one who had discovered it tossing on the shore, and regarded it only as a lucky find to make half a crown out of. Hugh's inmost soul revolted at the thought. And yet—— And yet, even so, he was not man enough to go boldly down to Orfordness and claim and rescue that sacred corpse, as he truly and firmly believed it to be, of Elsie Challoner's. He meant still in his craven soul to stand well with the world, and to crown his perfidy by marrying Winifred.

CHAPTER XVII.

BREAKING A HEART.

When Warren Relf returned to Lowestoft, burning with news and eager at his luck, his first act was to call his sister Edie hurriedly out of Elsie's room, and proceed to a consultation with her upon the strange evidence he had picked up so unexpectedly at Almundham Station. Should they show it to Elsie, or should they keep it from her? That was the question. Fortune had indeed favoured the brave; but how now to utilize her curious information? Should they let that wronged and suffering girl see the utter abysses of human baseness yawning in the man she once loved and trusted, or should they sedulously and carefully hide it all from her, lest they break the bruised reed with their ungentle handling? Warren Relf himself, after think-

ing it over in his own soul—all the way back to Lowestoft in his third-class carriage—was almost in favour now of the specious and futile policy of concealment. Why needlessly harrow the poor child's feelings? Why rake up the embers of her great grief? Surely she had been wounded and lacerated enough already. Let her rest content with what she knew so far of Massinger's cruel and treacherous selfishness.

But Edie met this plausible reasoning, after a true woman's fashion, with an emphatic negative. She stood out for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, come what might of it.

"Why?" Warren asked with a relenting eye.

"Because," Edie answered, looking up at him resolutely, "it would be better she should get it all over at once. It's like pulling a tooth—one wrench, and be done with it! What a pity she should spend her whole life long in mourning and wailing over this wicked man, who isn't and never was in any way worthy of her!—Warren, she's a dear, sweet, gentle girl. She takes my heart. I

love her dearly already.—She'll mourn and wail for him enough anyhow. I want to disenchant her as much as I can before it's too late. The sooner she learns to hate and despise him as he deserves, the better for everybody."

"Why?" Warren asked once more, with a curious side-glance.

"Because," Edie went on, very earnestly, "she may some day meet some other better man, who could make her ten thousand times happier as his wife, than this wretched, sordid, money-hunting creature could ever make any one. If we disenchant her at once, without remorse, it'll help that better man's case forward whenever he presents himself. If not—" She paused significantly. Their eyes met; Warren's fell. They understood one another.

"But isn't it selfish?" Warren asked wistfully.

Edie looked up at him with a profoundly meaningless expression on her soft round face. "Selfish!" she cried, making her mouth small. "I don't understand you. What on earth has selfishness to do with it

any way? Nobody spoke about any particular truer and better man. You jump too quick. I merely laid on a young man in the abstract. From the point of view of a young man in the abstract, I'm sure I'm right, absolutely right. I always am. It's a way I have, and I can't help it."

"Besides which," Warren Relf interposed suddenly, "if Massinger really did write that forged letter, she'll have to arrange something about it, you see, sooner or later. She'll want to set herself right with the Meyseys, of course, and she'll probably make some sort of representation or proposition to Massinger."

"She'll do nothing of the kind, my dear," Edie answered promptly with brisk confidence.—"You're a goose, Warren, and you don't one tiny little bit understand the inferior creatures. You men always think you know instinctively all about us women, and can read us through and through at a single glance, as if we were large print on a street-poster; while, as a matter of fact, you never really see an inch deep below the surface.—I'll tell you what she'll do, you great blind creature: she'll accept the forgery as if it were

in actual fact her own letter; she'll never write a word, for good or for evil, to contradict it or confirm it, to any of these horrid Whitestrand people; she'll allow this hateful wretch Massinger to go on believing she's really dead; and she'll cease to exist, as far as he's concerned, in a passive sort of way, henceforth and for ever."

"Will she?" Warren Relf asked dubiously. "How on earth do you know what she'll do, Edie?"

"Why, what else on earth *could* she do, silly?" his sister answered, with the same perfect conviction in her own inbred sagacity and perspicacity as ever. "Could she go and say to him, with tears in her eyes and a becoming smile on her pretty little lips: 'My own heart's darling, I love you devotedly—and I know you signed my name to that forged letter?' Could she fling herself on these Moxies, or Mumpsies, or Mixies, or Meyseys, or whatever else you call them, and say sweetly: 'I didn't run away from you; I wasn't in earnest? I only tried ineffectually to drown myself, for love of this dear, sweet, charming poetical cousin of mine, who dis-

gracefully jilted me in order to propose to your own daughter; and then, believing me to have killed myself for shame and sorrow, has trumped up letters and telegrams in my name, of malice prepense, on purpose to deceive you. He's a mean scoundrel, and I hate his very name; and I want him for myself; so I won't allow him to marry your Winifred, or whatever else her precious new-fangled high-faluting name may be.' Could any woman on earth so utterly efface herself and her own womanliness as to go and say all that, do you suppose, to anybody anywhere?—*You* may think so in your heart, I dare say, my dear boy; but you won't get a solitary woman in the world to agree with you on the point for one single minute."

The painter drew his hand slowly across his cold brow. "I suppose you're right, Edie," he answered, bewildered. "But what'll she do with herself, then, I wonder?"

"Do?" Edie echoed. "As if *do* were the word for it? Why, do nothing, of course—be; suffer; exist; mourn over it. She'd like, if she could, poor, tender, bruised, broken-hearted thing, to creep into a hole, with her

head hanging down, and die quietly, like a wounded creature, with no one on earth to worry or bother her. She mustn't die; but she won't *do* anything. All we've got to do ourselves is just to comfort her: to be silent and comfort her. She'll cease to live now; she'll annihilate herself; she'll retire from life; and that horrid man'll think she's dead; and that'll be all. She'll accept the situation. She won't expose him; she loves him too much a great deal for that. She won't expose herself; she's a great deal too timid and shrinking and modest for that. She'll leave things alone; that's all she can do.—And on the whole, my dear, if you only knew, it's really and truly the best thing possible."

So Edie took the letter and telegram pitifully in her hand, and went with what boldness she could muster up into Elsie's bedroom. Elsie was lying on the sofa, propped up on pillows, in the white dress she had worn all along, and with her face and hands as white as the dress stuff; and as Edie held the incriminating documents, part hidden in her gown, to keep them from Elsie, she felt like the dentist who hides behind his back

the cruel wrenching instrument with which he means next moment in one fierce tug to drag and tear your very nerves out. She stooped down and kissed Elsie tenderly. "Well, darling," she said—for illness makes women wonderfully intimate—"Warren's come back.—Where do you think he's been?—He's been over to-day as far as Almundham."

"Almundham!" Elsie repeated, with cheek more blanched and pale than ever. "Why, what was he doing over there to-day, dear? Did he hear anything about—about—— Were they all inquiring after me, I wonder?—Was there a great deal of talk and gossip abroad?—Oh, Edie, tell me quick all about it!"

"No, darling," Edie answered, pressing her hand tight, and signing to her mother, who sat by the bed, to clasp the other one; "nobody's talking. You shall not be discussed. Warren met Mr. Meysey himself at the Almundham Station; and Mr. Meysey was going to Scotland; and he said they'd heard from you twice already, to explain it all; and nobody seemed to think that—that anything serious in any way had happened."

"Heard from me twice!" Elsie cried,

puzzled. "Heard from me twice—to explain it all! Why, what on earth did he mean, Edie? There must be some strange mistake somewhere."

Edie leant over her with tears in her eyes. It was a horrible wrench, but come it must, and the sooner the better. They should understand where they stood at once. "No, no mistake, darling," she answered distinctly. "Mr. Meysey gave Warren the letter to read. —He's brought it back. I've got it here for you. It's in your own hand, he says.—Would you like to see it this moment, darling?"

Elsie's cheek showed pale as death now; but she summoned up courage to murmur "Yes."

It seemed the mere unearthly ghost of a *yes*, so hollow and empty was it; but she forced it out somehow, and took the letter. Edie watched her with bent brows and trembling lips. How would she take it? Would she see what it meant? Would she know who wrote it? Could she ever believe it?

Elsie gazed at it in dumb astonishment. So admirable was the imitation, that for a

moment's space she actually thought it was her own handwriting. She scanned it close. "My darling Winifred," it began as usual, and in her own hand too. Why, this must be just an old letter of her own to her friend and pupil; what possible connection could Mr. Meysey or Mr. Relf imagine it had with the present crisis? But then the date—the date was so curious: "September 17"—that fatal evening! She glanced through it all with a burning eye. Great heavens, what was this? "So wicked, so ungrateful: I know Mrs. Meysey will never forgive me." —"By the time this reaches you, I shall have left Whitestrand, I fear for ever."—"Darling, for heaven's sake, do try to hush this up as much as you can."—"Ever your affectionate, but heart-broken ELSIE."

A gasp burst from her bloodless lips. She laid it down, with both hands on her heart. That signature, ELSIE, betrayed the whole truth. She was white as a sheet now, and trembling visibly from head to foot. But she would go right through with it; she would not flinch; she would know it all—all—all, utterly.

"I never wrote it," she cried to Edie with a choking voice.

"I know you didn't, darling," Edie whispered in her ear.

"And you know who did?" Elsie sobbed out, terrified.

Edie nodded. "I know who did—at least, I suspect.—Cry, darling, cry. Never mind us. Don't burst your poor heart for want of crying."

But Elsie couldn't cry yet. She put her white hand, trembling, into her open bosom, and pulled out slowly, with long lingering reluctance—a tiny bundle of water-stained letters. They were Hugh's letters, that she had worn at her breast on that terrible night. She had dried them all carefully one by one here in bed at Lowestoft; and she kept them still next the broken heart that Hugh had so lightly sacrificed to mammon. Smudged and half-erased by immersion as they were, she could still read them in their blurred condition; and she knew them by heart already, for the matter of that, if the water had made them quite illegible.

She drew the last one out of its envelope

with reverent care, and laid it down side by side with the forged letter to Winifred. Paper for paper, they answered exactly, in size and shape and glaze and quality.

Hugh had often shown her how admirably he could imitate any particular handwriting. The suspicion was profound; but she would give him at least the full benefit of all possible doubts. She held it up to the light and examined the water-mark. Both were identical—an unusual paper; bought at a fantastic stationer's in Brighton. It was driving daggers into her own heart; but she would go right through with it: she must know the truth. She gave a great gasp, and then took three other letters singly from the packet. Horror and dismay were awakening within her the instincts and ideas of an experienced detective. They were the three previous letters she had last received from Hugh, in regular order. A stain caused by a drop of milk or grease, as often happens, ran right through the entire quire. It was biggest on the front page of the earliest letter, and smallest and dimmest on its back fly-leaf. It went on decreasing

gradually by proportionate gradations through the other three. She looked at the letter to Winifred with tearless eyes. It corresponded exactly in every respect; for it had been the fifth and middle sheet of the original series.

Elsie laid them all down on the sofa by her side with an exhausted air and turned wearily to Edie. Her face was flushed and feverish at last. She said nothing, but leaned back with a ghastly sob on her pillow. She knew to a certainty now it was Hugh who had done this nameless thing—Hugh who had done it, believing her, his lover, to be drowned and dead—Hugh who had done it at the very moment when, as he himself supposed, her lifeless body was tossing and dancing among the mad breakers, that roared and shivered with unholy joy over the hoarse sandbanks of the bar at Whitestrand.—It was past belief—but it was Hugh who had done it.

She could have forgiven him almost anything else save *that;* but *that*, never, ten thousand times never! She could have forgiven him even his cold and cruel speech

that last night by the river near the poplar: "I have never been engaged to you. I owe you nothing. And now I mean to marry Winifred." She could have forgiven him all, in the depth of her despair.—She could have loved him still, even—so profound is the power of first-love in a true pure woman's inmost nature—if only she could have believed he had melted and repented in sackcloth and ashes for his sin and her sorrow. If he had lost his life in trying to save her! If he had roused the county to search for her body! Nay, even if he had merely gone home, remorseful and self-reproaching, and had proclaimed the truth and his own shame in an agony of regret and pity and bereavement. —For her own sake, she was glad, indeed, he had not done all this; or at least she would perhaps have been glad if she had had the heart to think of herself at all at such a moment. But for him—for him—she was ashamed and horrified and stricken dumb to learn it.

For, instead of all this, what nameless and unspeakable thing had Hugh Massinger really done? Gone home to the inn, at the

very moment when she lay there senseless, the prey of the waves, that tossed her about like a plaything on their cruel crests—gone home to the inn, and without one thought of her, one effort to rescue her—for how could she think otherwise?—full only of vile and craven fears for his own safety, sat down at his desk and deliberately forged in alien handwriting that embodied Lie, that visible and tangible documentary Meanness, that she saw staring her in the face from the paper before her! It was ghastly; it was incredible; it was past conception; but it was, nevertheless, the simple fact. As she floated insensible down that hideous current, for the sea and the river to fight over her blanched corpse, the man she had loved, the man who had so long pretended to love her, had been quietly engaged in his own room in forging her name to a false and horrible and misleading letter, which might cover her with shame in the unknown grave to which his own cruelty and wickedness and callousness had seemingly consigned her! No wonder the tears stood back unwillingly from her burning eyeballs. For grief and horror and

misery like hers, no relief can be found in mere hysterical weeping.

And who had done this heartless, this dastardly, this impossible thing? Hugh Massinger—her cousin Hugh—the man she had set on such a pinnacle of goodness and praise and affection—the man she had worshipped with her whole full heart—the man she had accepted as the very incarnation of all that was truest and noblest and best and most beautiful in human nature. Her idol was dethroned from its shrine now; and in the empty niche from which it had cast itself prone, she had nothing to set up instead for worship. There was not, and there never had been, a Hugh. The universe swam like a frightful blank around her. The sun had darkened itself at once in her sky. The solid ground seemed to fail beneath her feet, and she felt herself suspended alone above an awful abyss, a seething and tossing and eddying abyss of utter chaos.

Edie Relf held her hand still; while the sweet gentle motherly old lady with the snow-white hair and the tender eyes put a cold palm up against her burning brow to

help her to bear it. But Elsie was hardly aware of either of them now. Her head swam wildly round and round in a horrible phantasmagoria, of which the Hugh that was not and that never had been formed the central pivot and main revolving point; while the Hugh that was just revealing himself utterly in his inmost blackness and vileness and nothingness whirled round and round that fixed centre in a mad career, she knew not how, and she asked not wherefore. "Cry, cry, darling, do try to cry," both the other women urged upon her with sobs and tears; but Elsie's eyeballs were hard and tearless, and her heart stood still every moment within her with unspeakable awe and horror and incredulity.

Presently she stretched out a vague hand towards Edie. "Give me the telegram, dear," she said in a cold hard voice, as cold and hard as Hugh Massinger's own on that fearful evening.

Edie handed it to her without a single word.

She looked at it mechanically, her lips set tight; then she asked in the same cold metallic tone as before: "Do you know

anything of 27 Holmbury Place, Duke Street, St. James's?"

"Warren says the club porter of the Cheyne Row lives there," Edie answered softly.

Elsie fell back upon her pillows once more. "Edie," she cried, "oh, Edie, Edie, hold me tight, or I shall sink and die!—If only he had been cruel and nothing more, I wouldn't have minded it; indeed, I wouldn't. But that he should be so cowardly, so mean, so unworthy of himself—it kills me, it kills me —I couldn't have believed it!"

"Kiss her, mother," Edie whispered low. "Kiss her, and lay her head, so, upon your dear old shoulder! She's going to cry now! I know she's going to cry! Pat her cheek: yes, so. If only she can cry, she can let her heart out, and it won't quite kill her."

At the words, Elsie found the blessed relief of tears; they rose to her eyes in a torrent flood. She cried and cried as if her heart would burst. But it eased her somehow. The two other women cried in sympathy, holding her hands, and encouraging her to let out her pent-up emotions to the very full

by that natural outlet. They cried together silently for many minutes. Then Elsie pressed their two hands with a convulsive grasp; and they knew she would live, and that the shock had not entirely killed out the woman within her.

An hour later, when Edie, with eyes very red and swollen, went out once more into the little front parlour to fetch some needlework, Warren Relf intercepted her with eager questioning. "How is she now?" he asked with an anxious face. "Is she very ill? And how did she take it?"

"She's crying her eyes out, thank heaven," Edie answered fervently. "And it's broken her heart. It's almost killed her, but not quite. She's crushed and lacerated like a wounded creature."

"But what will she do?" Warren asked, with a wistful look.

"Do? Just what I said. Nothing at all. Annihilate and efface herself. She'll accept the position, leaving things exactly where that wretched being has managed to put them; and so far as he's concerned, she'll drop altogether out of existence."

"How?"

"She'll go with mamma and me to San Remo."

"And the Meyseys?"

"She'll leave them to form their own conclusions. Henceforth, she prefers to be simply nobody."

END OF VOL. I.

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